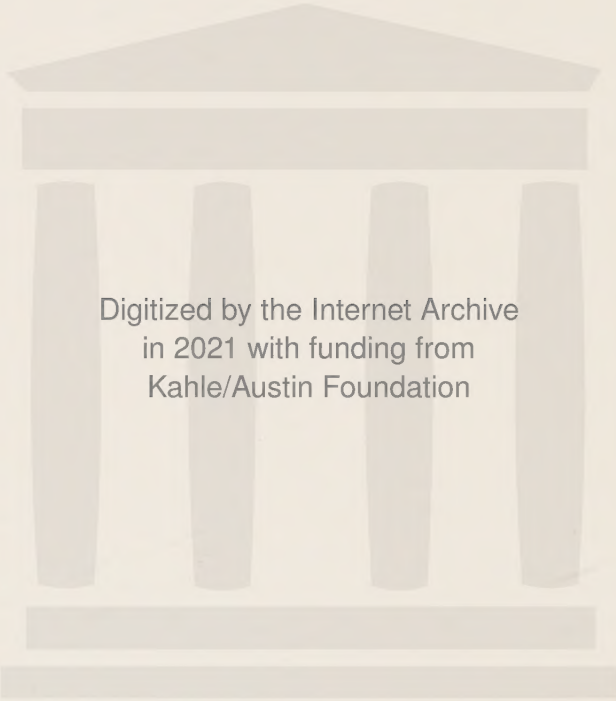


THE HARDWAY DIAMONDS MYSTERY





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BY
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THE HARDWAY
DIAMONDS MYSTERY

CHAPTER ONE

ALTHOUGH the fog was so thick that from the pavement one could scarcely see the lights of the vehicles in the roadway, Mr. Thomas Herridge, known to his intimates as Pussy, hurried confidently on his way, avoiding collisions with a peculiar lithe dexterity. He crossed Oxford Street, and was at once swallowed up in the deep yellow murk which filled the gaps between the houses like the depths of some turbid sea. Here, foot passengers were much less frequent, but, curiously enough, instead of quickening his pace, Mr. Herridge slackened it.

And yet, perhaps, this was natural enough. Even the most experienced Londoner might have been excused for losing his bearings. Once away from the railings which guarded the area steps, one was lost, as if in some uncharted land. The taxi-drivers had long ago given up their hopeless attempts to find their way, and the side streets were practically deserted. At intervals a dim halo would loom out of the fog, marking the position of a lamp-post. Beyond this the wayfarer had no beacon by which to guide his uncertain footsteps.

But it was not any doubt of his whereabouts that caused Mr. Herridge to modify his haste. He seemed to be in possession of a sixth sense, which told him unfailingly of his locality. He was, in fact, in Woodbridge Square, surrounded by tall and dignified houses, from behind whose closely curtained windows came no

single gleam of light. Mr. Herridge walked slowly round the Square twice, every sense on the alert. He saw for a fleeting moment the lantern of a policeman on beat, he heard the steps of one or two cautious pedestrians feeling their way along the railings; now and then a faint whiff of cooking reached his nose through an area window. And, at last, apparently satisfied, he paused beneath a lamp-post to consult a neat silver watch, which he carried on his wrist. It was half-past eight.

For an instant he stood tense and listening. The fog was like a curtain round him, through which an indistinct roar came to him in muffled waves of sound. But his sharp ears could detect no footsteps in his vicinity, and with a smile of satisfaction he started to walk again, counting his steps carefully. Thirty yards from the lamp-post he crossed the pavement with outstretched hands, until he felt the masonry of a pillar. One more tense pause, and then, with incredible agility and swiftness, he swarmed up the pillar into the darkness.

But fog and darkness had no terrors for Mr. Herridge. Reaching the top of the pillar, he flung out an arm and felt for the edge of the projecting coping. Grasping this, he swung himself up, and in a couple of seconds found himself on the balcony above the porch of Lord Hardway's town house.

His first action on reaching the balcony was unexpected. From the pockets of his raincoat he produced a pair of light gymnasium shoes. Then, swiftly unlacing his boots, he drew them off and slipped on the shoes. Finally he divested himself of his coat, and laid this and the boots carefully in one corner of the balcony.

Peer as he would, he could find no gap through which he could see anything of the room within. But his experience told him that no curtains shaded a window so completely as to hide every glimmer of a lighted room. The window was that of a drawing-room, as he knew from the result of much careful study of the house. The time, and the fact that the drawing-room was apparently unlighted, made it practically certain that Lord and Lady Hardway were at dinner. Again Mr. Herridge smiled, and, with a preparatory gesture, rubbed his gloved hands against his thighs.

He stepped back a couple of paces, and suddenly leapt into the air, towards the stone wall of the house. For an instant his fingers sought frantically for some support, but failed to find it.

Without a sound he alighted once more upon the balcony. He moved a couple of feet farther to the left, and leapt again. This time his fingers found a ledge, and curled round it like steel clamps. With a swift movement he raised himself until one foot was on the ledge. A second's groping with outstretched arm, and he found the sill of the window above him. Very cautiously he straightened himself until his feet were on the ledge, and his hands upon the window sill.

He had now no fears of being observed from the Square. The fog was far too thick for the most powerful lamp to reveal him at such a height from the ground. But it would not do to be too precipitate. There were servants in the house, and it was necessary for him to discover what he could of their movements. So, absolutely motionless, he remained where he was, apparently perfectly at ease in his precarious position.

Suddenly a bright streak of light split the dark outline of the window vertically in half. The curtains were not fully drawn, half an inch separated them. Through the slit thus caused he could see every detail of the room, and the figure of the maid who had just entered it and switched on the light. She bustled about for a few minutes, turning back the cover of the bed, laying out night-clothes, tidying up the dressing-table. Then, with a parting glance round the room, she disappeared, switching off the light behind her.

Mr. Herridge waited for a couple of minutes, in case she should have forgotten anything. Then, having one hand on the sill, with the other he applied a small polished steel instrument to the hasp of the window. There was a faint click, and very cautiously he raised the window sash until there was enough room for his body to pass. He dived in head first, alighting noiselessly on his hands. Here he remained, with his ear against the floor. The only footsteps which he could hear were those of the maid, and these were some distance away along the corridor. He drew himself to his feet, produced an electric torch and a bunch of curious-looking keys, and glided across the room to the head of the bed.

The safe had been cunningly hidden in the panelling of the room, but Mr. Herridge had no difficulty in finding it. He fingered a boss on the panelling, which under his touch, slid aside, revealing an orifice beneath. Into this he inserted one of his keys, only to withdraw it and try another. At the third attempt the lock yielded, and a portion of the panelling swung back, revealing a small jewel safe, steel lined. Into this he inserted his hand, and withdrew a massive leather

case. A glance inside it revealed that the necklace was in its place. With a swift movement Mr. Herridge concealed the case about his person. He re-locked the safe, and left the room by the way he had come, shutting the window behind him. His ingenious instrument was incapable of closing the hasp; this evidence of his entry he was forced to leave behind him. He reached the balcony, put on his boots and coat, and lowered himself to the pavement once more. Then, quietly and without hurry, he began to walk towards the corner of the Square.

He had been only just in time. The fog was beginning to lift, with that amazing rapidity which characterises London fogs. Already it was appreciably thinner; the curb was visible from the railings, the lamps illuminated an ever-growing circle of mist. Mr. Herridge congratulated himself upon having chosen his moment so well. It did not matter to him now how soon the fog lifted. In fact, it would help him. There would be more people in the streets and it would be easier for him to pursue his way unobserved.

When he was about fifty yards from Lord Hardway's house he began unostentatiously to quicken his steps. A car was coming up behind him, moving scarcely faster than he was himself, its driver obviously guiding himself by the line of the curb. This was a nuisance. It was just possible that the driver might notice him sufficiently to give a rough description if questioned subsequently. The theft was pretty sure to be discovered before very long, and Mr. Herridge was not particularly anxious to be seen just then in Woodbridge Square. He noticed with satisfaction that the effect of quickening his steps was that the car did not gain upon him.

Having reached the corner of the Square, Mr. Herridge turned sharply into Deben Street. And, as he did so, for the first time he felt a sudden sickening conviction that he was being followed. He could hear or see nothing, but his extraordinarily sharp perception told him that somewhere in the fog was another form, as silent as himself. He checked himself, and cowered back against the railings, trying to pierce the darkness. As he did so a dark shadow loomed suddenly into the circle of light cast by the lamp at the corner.

Mr. Herridge knew that his only chance of escaping observation lay in remaining motionless, and trusting to the shadow passing him by. But a sudden and unreasonable panic took possession of him. The shadow materialised into the figure of a man, his height and bulk magnified by the fog. And when this menacing figure turned the corner and came straight towards him, Mr. Herridge lost his head and made a bolt for it down Deben Street. But it was too late, a hand like iron fell upon his shoulder, almost knocking him to the ground. And as he staggered, his arms were seized, he was swung round like a baby, and a pair of handcuffs snapped over his wrists.

He was so dazed, that for a moment he could not speak, but stood there facing his captor, a bluff-faced, burly man, who smiled at him sardonically. "Why, bless me, if it isn't Pussy!" he exclaimed. "Lost your way in the fog, haven't you, Pussy? This is Mayfair, not Wapping, you know."

Mr. Herridge made no reply. The man was a total stranger to him and he wondered dizzily how he came to recognise him. He rather prided himself on his knowledge of the plain-clothes squad, but to this man's

identity he could find no clue. Well, it didn't matter much. Here he was, taken with the diamonds on him. What was the shortest sentence he dare expect?

The car had drawn up beside the pavement, and its driver had leapt out. "Here, Jim, just hold Mr. Herridge's hand for a moment, will you?" said Pussy's captor. "I shouldn't like him to lose himself in the fog again. Now then, Pussy, where have you stowed them. Pockets? No. Ah, something hard under your shirt! Nice sort of chest protector, Pussy, just the thing for a fog like this. Right, I've got them, Jim."

The driver got back into his seat, and his captor pushed the unresisting Mr. Herridge into the back. "We'll have a little drive together, won't we, Pussy?" he said, and he took his place beside him. "Just as far as the Yard, where we'll have a nice cosy chat. Right away, Jim."

The car started off, and Mr. Herridge, still handcuffed, settled himself back into his seat, trying to summon all his wits to meet the coming ordeal. It wasn't only the Hardway diamonds; that was a fair cop, from which there was no chance of escape. But there were other things, about which awkward questions might be asked, past crimes which, unless he were careful, might be dragged to light. It was with no cheerful anticipation that Mr. Herridge regarded the coming interview.

The fog was still thick, and the driver had some difficulty in finding his way. At the end of Deben Street he checked, and flung a question over his shoulders to his companion. The latter leant forward to reply, momentarily slackening his grasp of Mr. Herridge's arm. In a flash Mr. Herridge had wriggled

himself free. With a sudden desperate movement he vaulted clean out of the car, and fell sprawling in the roadway. Scrambling to his feet, he took to his heels and ran as he had never run before. He heard a shout behind him, and then the kindly fog swallowed him up once more.

CHAPTER TWO

MR. HERRIDGE's knowledge of London was extensive and peculiar. Even in the first mad dash of his escape his instinct of locality kept him from running into any cul-de-sac in which he must be instantly trapped. He kept to the wide streets, still shrouded in fog, and doubled back on his tracks, until he was once more in the unchartered wastes of Woodbridge Square.

The centre of the Square was occupied by a patch of turf, in which stood a few plane trees, the whole surrounded by a tall iron railing. Manacled though he was, Mr. Herridge found no difficulty in surmounting this. He ran lightly to the centre of the turf, and there paused, striving with all his senses to penetrate the fog. But all that came to his ears was the curiously muffled roar of London. It dawned upon him, almost with a shock of apprehension, that there was no pursuit.

This puzzled him even more than his capture had puzzled him. He had expected, even as he leapt from the car, the sudden shrilling of a police whistle, to be taken up and re-echoed on all sides by unseen constables on beat. But nothing of the sort had happened. Beyond the startled shout of his captor, the men in the car had given no sign. Mr. Herridge, standing tense and vigilant in the centre of the Square, felt a creepy sensation of uneasiness running up and down his spine. This ominous silence could only mean that by some mysterious means the police had followed

him; knew where he was at this very moment. He imagined he could hear the silent tread of men pouring into the Square, lining the railings, waiting for the moment when he must seek escape from his self-chosen prison. Perhaps they would not wait for that. Even now they might be entering the garden by a dozen gates, converging upon him——

Inaction was impossible; and to his agonised eyes it seemed that every moment the fog was lifting; that he must shortly be revealed to a thousand staring eyes. But where to go? Had he been seen doubling back, every exit from the Square would now be blocked, even if he succeeded in surmounting the garden railings unobserved. And his manacled hands must necessarily betray him to the first chance passer-by.

More in desperation than with any real hope of escape he crept quietly over the turf towards the railings. At every step he expected to see the gleam of a policeman's lantern, but still he kept on. At last he reached the railings, and cowered against them in an agony of expectation. A sound of slow footfalls came to him, and he shrank away from the railings again. The steps approached, maddening in their deliberation. Their owner knew where he was hidden; he was advancing upon him with the relentlessness of doom. He was not more than twenty yards away, ten——

Mr. Herridge, quivering in every nerve, like a hare lying close in its furrow, listened—each step reverberating in his ears like thunder. They passed—he was lost. Then, unhurriedly, they passed on.

A sudden reaction fell upon Mr. Herridge. His terror gave place to a sort of wild bravado, and he felt equal to facing the unseen dangers which surrounded

him. Better, far, to have a run for his money than to be caught like a rat in a trap. He ran at the railings, scrambled over them without a sound and landed on his feet in the road beyond. Then expecting every moment to see a cordon of police loom out of the darkness before him, he began to run, easily and silently.

He had first no clear idea of his goal. It hardly seemed to matter, since his recapture was practically a certainty. He began to long for the tension to end, to feel that grasp upon his shoulder which would end his brief period of liberty. Some instinct took him eastwards, towards the Deben Street exit of the Square. This, surely, was the direction his pursuers would at least expect him to take. To his amazement the exit was unguarded, and he ran the whole length of Deben Street, keeping to the middle of the road and avoiding the few passers-by whose business was pressing enough to induce them to brave the fog. Then, incredulous of his continued freedom, he slowed his pace down to a walk.

His wits were slowly returning to him, and as he walked he sought desperately for some plan of action. Whichever way he looked, things seemed pretty hopeless. His identity was known to the police; he had been captured with the famous Hardway diamonds upon him. The plain-clothes man who had arrested him had addressed him by the name by which he was known to his associates. No doubt he had been watched, traced to Woodbridge Square. His captor had even mentioned Wapping; without doubt his lodgings there were under observation. It would merely be to walk into the lion's mouth to attempt to make his way home.

Even if he could cross London in his present plight,

the spectacle of a man with manacled hands was not so common that it would fail to attract attention. He was bound to be stopped by the first constable he met. By this time Scotland Yard would have warned every policeman in London to look out for him. He could not even change his appearance, for it was impossible for him to so much as take off his raincoat. There seemed to be nothing for him but to slink about the streets, like some forlorn Wandering Jew, until the fog should lift, and reveal him to the eager eyes of his pursuers.

So hopeless did the prospect seem that he almost resolved to make his way to the nearest police station and give himself up. There, at least, he would find warmth and respite from his ceaseless tramping. But the prospect of recapture was too awful to be lightly faced. There was just one faint chance for him, so faint that it seemed hardly worthy of a moment's consideration. If he could only reach Ginger Murdoch's place, he might find asylum. Not that Ginger would welcome him with open arms. That was hardly to be expected. But he knew an argument which would prevail over Ginger's inhospitality. He could threaten that if he himself were nabbed, he would split on Ginger. And Ginger had as much reason to dread an appearance in court as he had himself.

Ginger Murdoch lived in Hoxton, five miles perhaps from where he stood, even if he took the direct route. But the direct route led through a series of main thoroughfares which, even in the thickest fog, were bound to be thronged with traffic. There was no possibility of getting rid of the damning handcuffs until he reached Murdoch's place. The only thing to do was to follow the most unfrequented streets, and

try to attract as little attention as possible. This would take him a couple of hours at least.

He folded his arms, pushing each hand as far up the opposite sleeve as possible. In this way only the chain of the handcuffs was visible, and Mr. Herridge trusted that it would not be noticeable in the fog. Then he set off, arms folded, head bent, trying to assume an innocent air of contemplation.

It was a weary business. It seemed to him that such infrequent passers-by as he met gazed at him with hostile curiosity, and followed him with their eyes as he disappeared into the mist. His ears were constantly on the alert for the measured foot-fall of a policeman. Every constable in London seemed to be abroad that night. Several times Mr. Herridge was compelled to turn suddenly and dodge up some side street till the guardian of the law had passed. More than once, after one or other of these detours, he lost his way and panic seized him at the thought that the last vestiges of the fog might clear away before he could reach his goal. Hoxton appeared to him as an Ultima Thule, scarcely to be attained in the course of a lifetime. And, even when he got there? He moistened his lips nervously as he considered how he should approach Ginger Murdoch, and what reply that uncertain-tempered gentleman would make to his representations.

His way lay through Pentonville, and as he climbed the hill, he realised to his horror that the fog was perceptibly thinning. This would never do, he must keep to the lower ground. He swung round, and set out once more at a slightly increased pace. And at the very first corner he almost collided with a policeman.

He might still have saved himself, but the encounter was the final blow to his shattered nerves. In a sudden and unreasoning access of panic he took to his heels and ran blindly in the first direction which presented itself.

The policeman, amazed at this confession of guilt, gave immediate chase. Even then Mr. Herridge might have escaped, had his terror not been so extreme that he failed to notice the curb on the opposite side of the road. He tripped and fell, and before he could drag himself to his feet the policeman's hand was upon him.

"'Ere, what's the game?" asked the policeman indignantly. "Think you're playing a game of tip and run, or what? 'Ullo, what's this?"

Mr. Herridge's hands had fallen out of his sleeves, and the handcuffs glinted patently in the light of the policeman's lantern. The latter examined them with puzzled interest.

But Mr. Herridge's wits were coming back to him. This man at least had evidently not been warned of his escape, and in the fact lay the glimmer of a chance for him.

"What's this mean?" asked the policeman sternly.

"It's—it's a bet," replied Mr. Herridge earnestly. "There was a couple of chaps in a pub what bet me I wouldn't walk across London in these 'ere things without being copped. I'll be getting back and pay up."

"Plenty of time for that," remarked the policeman pleasantly. "You come along with me and tell the sergeant all about it. He's a rare chap for a bet. And I'd come quietly, too, if I was you."

Mr. Herridge's heart sank. The policeman's hand

had closed round the chain of the handcuffs, and there was no possibility of escape.

"You've no call to march me through the streets like this," he whined. "I'll come quietly enough if you'll take these blasted things off. Why, people will think I'm arrested!"

"Funny how people make these little mistakes," replied the policeman imperturbably. "If we meet any of your posh friends I'll explain that we're merely having a stroll together. Now, then, come along, and don't let's have any more of your swank."

The police station was not far away, and they reached it without further adventure. Mr. Herridge was led before the sergeant, who regarded him with marked disfavour while the constable told his story. But what filled Mr. Herridge with amazement was that he was obviously not recognised. Was it possible that during the hours he had spent wandering through London the news of his escape from the plain-clothes man had not been circulated? If this were so, there was no point in his giving himself away before he need.

"It's as true as I stand here, sergeant," he protested. "Couple o' chaps in a pub at Islington bet me I wouldn't walk to the Bank and back without being spotted. Bet me a fiver, they did, and seeing that it was a bit foggy-like, I took them on. Only came up to town to-day, I did. Thought I might find a job o' work to keep my wife and kids. What would be the good of my lying to you, sergeant?"

"Some folks tell lies because it comes natural," replied the sergeant. "We'll fix you up with board and lodging for the night, anyhow, till we find out a bit more about you in the morning."

"But you can't put me in the cells!" expostulated Mr. Herridge. "I ain't done nothing you can charge me with."

"Charge you!" exclaimed the sergeant. "I'll charge you all right. Being in unlawful possession of a pair of handcuffs, the property of His Majesty the King. Put him in number six, George."

CHAPTER THREE

As A result of a telephonic message from the sergeant to Scotland Yard, Detective Inspector Brooks of the C.I.D. arrived at the police station in the early hours of the following morning. Brooks was an imposing and formidable figure, standing well over six foot in his socks, with a chest like a bull and a voice like a fog-horn. He had risen from the ranks by the merit of several brilliant pieces of work. Behind his massive appearance he had a quick and shrewd brain, and a rough good nature which had earned him, even among criminals, the reputation of being a white man.

"It's a queer thing about this chap, sir," said the sergeant. "Of course his account of himself is all bunkum. We went through his pockets and found a very decent collection of tools and a pair of gymnasium shoes. He's one of the regulars, all right, and no doubt you will be able to identify him."

"Did he give you his name and address, sergeant?" asked Brooks.

The sergeant smiled. "He said his name was Tomkins, that he had a wife and family in Wigan, and that he came to London for the first time yesterday," he replied. "As a matter of fact, a blind man could tell that he is a cockney, and that he's never been farther than Margate."

"And your man found him wandering about with a pair of handcuffs on, did he?" said Brooks. "That's

a queer thing, for we've had no news of a prisoner escaping from his escort. You saw him yourself with the handcuffs on, I suppose?"

"He had them on when he was brought in," replied the sergeant. "I've got them here, sir, and I'd like you to have a look at them, if you don't mind."

He produced the handcuffs, and laid them out for the Inspector to examine. Brooks took them up and turned them over carefully. They were an ordinary regulation pair, such as could be found in any police station. But Brooks seemed to find them interesting, for he examined every inch of them with the utmost care. At last he put them down with a puzzled frown. "It's a rum thing, sergeant, but I can't see the official stamp on them," he said.

"No, sir," replied the sergeant. "That's what seemed queer to me. They're brand new, so it isn't as if it could have been rubbed off. Looks to me as if they'd been issued somehow without being stamped."

"It looks like it, certainly," replied Brooks. He walked across the room to the window, where he stood staring reflectively into the yard beneath. That a pair of handcuffs could have come into use at any police station without being stamped with the official mark was unthinkable. He was well acquainted with the routine of the Stores Department, and he knew that the absence of the stamp could not have escaped the many eyes which would have inspected them before issue.

Brooks turned abruptly from the window. "I'll have a look at your Mr. Tomkins, if you don't mind, sergeant," he said. "Perhaps I'd better see him alone.

I may be able to persuade him to unbosom his aching heart to me."

The Inspector entered the cell, and a smile appeared upon his face as his eyes beheld its occupant. But it was not until the sergeant had retired out of earshot that he spoke.

"Well, I never! If it isn't my old friend Pussy Herridge," he exclaimed. "Whatever brought you into this part of the world, Pussy? There surely aren't any cribs to crack in Pentonville, are there? You didn't mean to break into the gaol by any chance, did you?"

"I didn't mean to break into anywhere, Mr. Brooks," replied Herridge earnestly. "You know me, sir, and you know I wouldn't be likely to do such a thing."

"Oh, I know you all right, Pussy," replied Brooks. "You wouldn't dream of staining the white flower of a blameless life. But it's very thoughtless of you to carry those pretty little tools of yours about with you. They're so apt to produce a wrong impression. Especially as one of them has the marks of paint still on it. You might at least keep them clean."

Mr. Herridge, his eyes fixed intently on the Inspector, made no reply. His whole faculties were devoted to the task of discovering whether or not Brooks knew of his previous night's adventure.

"Come, now, Pussy," continued the Inspector. "That story you told the sergeant won't do, you know. You might have kept it to amuse those kiddies of yours at Wigan. We're bound to find out the truth in an hour or two, anyhow. You may just as well cough up the story and get it over."

In a flash Mr. Herridge's mind was made up. Brooks did not know that he had taken the Hardway diamonds! Impossible as it seemed, he had not heard of his arrest by the plain-clothes man. Perhaps they had not made their report yet, perhaps they were still searching for him! There was, of course, no hope of escape. Ultimately the news must come through. But Mr. Herridge, with the instincts of a rat in a trap, would fight to the last gasp.

Rather because lying came to him naturally than in any hope of being believed, he instantly framed a new story. "Well, I don't mind telling you, Mr. Brooks," he replied. "I didn't like to say it to the sergeant here. All the police aren't like you, sir. Once they gets a down on a chap they don't give him a chance. Truth is, Mr. Brooks, I got properly blind last night, and I don't rightly know what happened."

"Let that be an awful warning to you, Pussy," remarked the Inspector. "Carry on, my lad, and let's hear the sordid story of the debauch."

"Well, it was this way, sir. I've been getting a bit fed up with Wapping lately. It's no place for a chap what wants to run straight. The boys there persecutes an honest chap something terrible. So I looks about, and hears of a decent place in Islington and yesterday evening I goes up to have a look at it. Well, you know how it is, sir, I walks into a pub, I don't rightly remember the name of it, and gets talking with a lot of young chaps like myself."

"No doubt a most edifying conversation, Pussy," commented the Inspector. "And what next?"

"That's just what I can't tell you, Mr. Brooks. It's my belief that they doped my drink. We hadn't had

more'n a dozen rounds or so when I begins to feel all funny and sleepy like. And the next thing I knows, I was walking about with them blessed bracelets on. Didn't know where I was, Mr. Brooks, and that's a fact. I must have walked miles through the fog. It's a mercy I wasn't run over or something. And as for the tools, why, them chaps must have put them in my pockets, sir."

The Inspector's face took on an expression of respectful admiration. "Gee, I wish I had your imagination, Pussy," he exclaimed. "The Chief's always saying that the first quality in a detective is imagination. I'd be one of the Big Four if I had you to help me. In fact, I think I'll put you away where I know where to find you for a bit. I can come to you for advice now and then, can't I?"

Brooks left the cell, and walked slowly back along the corridor to the sergeant's room. "I haven't got it yet, sergeant," he said cheerfully. "The man is an old friend of mine. He's never done time yet, but he's been more or less under observation for a couple of years. His name is Tom Herridge, and he lives in Creek Street, Wapping. But how he came by those handcuffs I can't make out. Bring him up and get him remanded for further evidence. I'll have a look round Wapping myself to-night."

On his way back to Scotland Yard the Inspector devoted his mind to this curious adventure of Pussy Herridge. That there was more in it than met the eye, he was convinced. He was pretty certain that the handcuffs with which he had been manacled did not belong to the police. In the first place, there was the difficulty of accounting for the absence of the official

stamp, and in the second, it was unthinkable that the escape of a prisoner should not have been immediately notified to the police. Who, then, had handcuffed him, and why?

Inspector Brooks had made an exhaustive study of the methods of the rival gangs of criminals which thronged the underworld of London. He knew to a certainty that Mr. Herridge was involved with these, and he had a pretty shrewd suspicion that the machinations of one of the gangs were responsible for his adventure. It was, for instance, quite possible that somebody had found it convenient to keep Herridge out of the way while some coup was in preparation, in order to prevent him or his friends from anticipating the attempt, whatever it might be. Herridge might have been lured to some convenient house, and there locked up and handcuffed. From this seclusion he had escaped, and had been on his way home when the Pentonville constable arrested him. Not at all an unlikely theory.

The more Brooks considered it, the more he liked it. It would account for the amazing fairy stories Herridge had chosen to tell. If the gang, which had trapped him had been a powerful one, he would not have dared to put the police on the track of its members. Herridge would realise the fate likely to overtake him if he mentioned names, and would prefer to submit to the inconvenience of a few days in the cells. No serious charge could be laid against him, for, after all, there was no law against people walking about in handcuffs.

In Brooks's eyes the matter was of very little importance, so far as Herridge himself was concerned. But it might form a clue to the machinations of some

powerful gang, whose activities, if revealed, might throw light upon hitherto unsolved crimes. Trace the gang which had found it convenient to kidnap Herridge, discover their reasons for so doing, and a whole series of interesting facts might be discovered.

So Brooks reasoned. The difficulty was, how to make Herridge speak. Brooks, essentially kind-hearted as he was, often regretted the prejudices of civilisation, which disapproved of a little mild torture. Nothing desperate, of course. Just a glowing brazier with a few hot irons on it. Their actual application would scarcely be necessary. The presence alone of this gentle stimulant would be quite sufficient to overcome the reluctance of criminals of the Herridge type——

The Inspector sighed as he forced his thoughts into more orthodox channels. Denied the possibilities of physical intimidation, he would be compelled to resort to subtler methods. Herridge, if he could not be made to speak, might be entrapped into statements which could be used as clues. Brooks had an instinctive feeling that something pretty big lay behind the apparently trifling incident.

He was still thinking of what he should say when he next visited the imaginative Pussy when he entered the portals of Scotland Yard. But he had not penetrated very far into the recesses of the building when a colleague accosted him. "Hullo, Brooks, here you are at last!" he said. "The Chief has been looking for you for the last half-hour."

"Right! I'll go and see if I can comfort him," replied Brooks.

He went up to the Assistant Commissioner's room, and knocked on the door. Bidden to enter, he found

his Chief in consultation with an exquisitely dressed man of about thirty, with a curiously melancholy cast of countenance, belied by a pair of twinkling eyes. The Assistant Commissioner looked up as the Inspector came in. "Ah, good-morning, Brooks," he said. "This is Mr. Richard Penhampton. You might spin your yarn to the Inspector, Dick."

CHAPTER FOUR

"I'D BETTER begin by explaining who I am," said Dick Penhampton. "I'm Lord Hardway's brother-in-law; he married my sister Daphne ten years ago. They live in one of those old-fashioned houses in Woodbridge Square. I don't suppose I need tell you anything about Hardway, Inspector. You probably know all about him."

The Inspector nodded. Lord Hardway, though never forcing himself into the public eye, was a fairly well-known man. He had held one or two minor parts in the Government, and his speeches in the House of Lords were always listened to with respect. Socially, Lady Hardway was a very popular hostess, and she and her husband were always to be seen at the most exclusive functions. While not overpoweringly rich, they possessed enough to gratify their excellent tastes, and to contribute largely to such charities as appealed to them.

Seeing the Inspector's nod, Dick continued, "As you probably know, my sister entertains a good deal. The house is usually full of people and that sort of thing. But, as it happens, they had no engagements last night, and rang me up to come and dine with them. I had better explain that I am a bachelor, and live in rooms just off Jermyn Street. They dine at a quarter past eight, and I meant to reach the house just before then. As a matter of fact, I was a few minutes late, owing to the fog. We did not sit down to dinner till twenty-

five minutes past. After dinner, we went into Hardway's study—my sister usually sits there with him when she is alone—and stayed there for the rest of the evening. I left the house before midnight and walked home.

"Now, among the Hardway possessions is an extremely valuable, and, to my mind, exceedingly ugly diamond necklace. It is supposed to contain some of the stones of Marie Antoinette's famous necklace, which was stolen by the La Mottes. They, you remember, took it to pieces, and sold many of the stones in London. This necklace is kept in a concealed safe let into the wall in my sister's bedroom. There are two keys to this safe. One Hardway keeps on his bunch, the other is deposited at the bank.

"Last night, when my sister was dressing for dinner, she borrowed Hardway's key and opened the safe to take out some other jewelry. The necklace was there in its case, and was seen by both my sister and her husband, who was in the room at the time. Hardway himself closed the safe and locked it, under my sister's eyes. This would be at about a quarter to eight."

Inspector Brooks, listening attentively, formed a very good opinion of Dick Penhampton. He had a gift for stating the essential facts, without burdening his story with a mass of irrelevant detail.

"My sister went to bed a few minutes after I left the house," continued Dick. "It was about half-past twelve when she put the light out. She noticed nothing unusual in her room. She was called by her maid at eight o'clock this morning. On the maid drawing the curtains, she noticed that the hasp of the window had been wrenched open, and told my sister. Hardway

immediately opened the safe with his key. The necklace and its case had gone. Nothing else had been touched."

"Lady Hardway heard no disturbance in the night?" suggested the Inspector.

"None whatever," replied Dick. "And, as it happens, she is a very light sleeper."

"Then the necklace probably disappeared between eight o'clock and midnight," remarked Brooks. "The fog was at its thickest between eight and nine, during which period the burglar might have got into the house unobserved. Well, sir, if I may say so, I think it would be best for me to go round to Woodbridge Square at once."

"I'll take you round there now," replied Dick.

The two men took a taxi, and in a short time were closeted in the study with Lord Hardway, who showed himself most affable and ready to help. "It's a damned nuisance about this necklace, Inspector," he said. "It's not so much its intrinsic value—it's insured, of course—but its sentimental value. The stones have a history, and no others could have the same interest. You'll put me under an eternal obligation if you can trace it for me."

"I'll do my best, my lord," replied Brooks. "I should like to ask you a few questions, if I may."

"Fire away," said Lord Hardway.

"In the first place, how many people knew the secret of the safe?" began Brooks.

Lord Hardway smiled, rather ruefully. "It's difficult to say. The safe isn't exactly secret. It is rather hidden, as you will see presently when I show it to you. I've no doubt all the servants know of it; there are seven of them; Phelps, the butler, two footmen,

and four maids. Several of our friends have seen it too, I wouldn't say how many."

"Have your servants been with you long, my lord?" inquired the Inspector.

"It's an amazing thing to be able to say these days," replied Lord Hardway, "but we haven't had a new servant in the house for the last four years. Four years ago one of our housemaids left us to join her sister in South America and we took on another in her place, the daughter of one of my gamekeepers in the country, whom I have known since she was born. The rest of them have been with us since we were married."

"You employ no casual labour about the house, charwomen and so forth?" asked Brooks.

"No, the regular domestic staff seem able to cope with the situation," replied Lord Hardway. "The only stranger we have had in the place was a very decent fellow called Clarke. A couple of months ago one of the footmen had to go away suddenly to his father, who was very ill. This man Clarke came round, looking for a job, and I took him on.

"Phelps was very pleased with him; he did all the donkey work about the house, and turned out to be a very handy man. I might have taken him on permanently, but after he had been with us about three weeks he came to me and told me that his brother in Wigan, who had a shop, wanted him to help with the business. We were all very sorry when he went."

Something like the ghost of a smile passed over the Inspector's face. "Was this man Clarke a native of Lancashire, my lord?" he asked.

"Good gracious, no!" exclaimed Lord Hardway.

"He was a thoroughbred cockney, if I ever saw one. Why?"

"It struck me as curious that his brother should have a shop in Wigan," replied Brooks. "Well, my lord, I think that is all I need trouble you with at present. Perhaps you would permit me to examine the safe and the outside of the house?"

The Inspector spent the rest of the morning examining the house and questioning the servants. It was not until the afternoon that he returned to Scotland Yard to make his report to the Assistant Commissioner.

"Well, Brooks, what do you make of it?" asked that official cheerfully.

"It's perfectly plain up to a point, sir," replied Brooks. "I'd like to ask you a question, before I tell you what I have done, if you won't think me impertinent, sir."

Sir Edric Conway was extremely popular at the Yard. His subordinates knew that he trusted them, and that he allowed no rigid interpretation of discipline to act as a bar between him and them. He laughed at the Inspector's rather hesitating question.

"Ask me anything you like, Brooks," he replied. "I will admit that I have dined with Lord and Lady Hardway, but I wasn't at their house last night. I can produce a perfect alibi, if you have any suspicions."

"It's not that, sir," replied Brooks. "I only wondered why Mr. Penhampton came here to see you about the matter. I should have thought Lord Hardway himself——"

"Oh, that's easily explained," said Sir Edric. "Dick

Penhampton and I are old friends. I knew his father very well. Dick offered to come straight to me with the story as soon as his sister telephoned to him that the necklace had vanished. You didn't think that he took it, did you?"

"No, sir. I believe I know who took it, though I don't know where it is now," replied Brooks. "I only asked the question because it seemed odd."

"Quite right," remarked Sir Edric approvingly. "You say you think you know who took it?"

"I'd like to make a few more inquiries before I say for certain, sir. As it happens, the man I suspect is under lock and key at this moment. I saw at once, as soon as I had examined the place, that it is the same old story over again. There are traces of how the man got in scattered all over the front of the house. He just climbed up to the window of Lady Hardway's bedroom, forced the hasp, and let himself in. If it's as I think, the burglar played the old trick of getting into the house as a servant. Anyhow, a stranger had the run of the place for three weeks or so. The safe is one of those silly things hidden behind a bit of folding panelling. Anybody could open it with a skeleton key, once they knew where it was."

"Well, you seem to have got on pretty well, Brooks," remarked Sir Edric. "What are you going to do next?"

"Circulate a description of the stones, sir," replied Brooks. "I expect that whoever has got the necklace will break it up and try to sell the stones abroad. Then I'm going to trace the movements of the man I suspect, and if he was the burglar, find out what he has done with the stuff."

Sir Edric nodded. "Do whatever you think best,

Brooks," he said. "You had better turn over anything else you have on hand to some one else, Pollard for choice, and stick to this necklace business until you get to the bottom of it."

Brooks left the Assistant Commissioner's office, and went to his own room to think over what he had learnt. That Pussy Herridge was the perpetrator of the crime he had no doubt. It would be easy enough to prove that he had posed as Clarke; Phelps the butler could identify him if necessary. Brooks smiled as he reflected upon the crass stupidity of the ordinary professional crook. Herridge had no doubt heard of the name of Wigan in some comic allusion, and the name had stuck in his head.

Herridge's identity with Clarke being established, it would be a fair assumption that he had taken the necklace. The point was, what had he done with it, and what was the true explanation of his handcuff adventure? The most likely theory was that more than one man was in the plot. Herridge had removed the necklace from the safe in Woodbridge Square, and had taken it to some pre-arranged rendezvous. Here his accomplices had met him, and, determined to secure his share of the booty for themselves, had made off with the necklace, leaving him gagged and handcuffed. Herridge had escaped and been arrested by the policeman at Pentonville.

Brooks smiled as he realised Herridge's predicament. He could not put the police on the track of his confederates without admitting that he had himself stolen the necklace. On the other hand, every day that he spent in gaol lessened his chances of being able to track them down and secure his share of the booty, as he would almost certainly have done had he not been

arrested. And then the Inspector was struck with an idea. Why not let Pussy guide him to the necklace? Set the man at liberty, and shadow him night and day?

He sat back in his chair and considered the matter in all its bearings. "That's the dodge!" he exclaimed. "I'll set about it to-morrow. I think the much-injured Pussy is better out of the way until I've finished my job this evening. With a bit of luck I might learn a thing or two."

CHAPTER FIVE

THAT evening, shortly after six o'clock, Inspector Brooks sauntered into the District station at Westminster, and took a train eastwards. He had made no attempt to disguise himself; indeed his burly frame scarcely lent itself to any of the usual, and futile, methods.

He left the train at Mark Lane, and walked slowly across Tower Hill, stopping to admire the Port of London Authority building, which loomed up, huge and graceful, in the rich grey haze of the December evening. Then, leaving the approach to the Tower Bridge on his right hand, he turned into the dark entrance of Katherine Way.

At once he seemed to leave London behind him. The thronging crowds, hurrying from the City homewards, disappeared as if by magic, their place taken by the solitude of the warehouses on either side of him. Now and then a heavy lorry lumbered past him, laden with bales of some mysterious merchandise, or stood driverless outside the dimly lighted window of a public house. Men slouched past him, broad-shouldered forms, whose peculiar bowed walk showed them to be dock labourers. The roar of London came faintly to his ears, punctuated at intervals by the insistent hooting of some impatient tug upon the river.

As he went still further eastward, a broad shaft of light struck across the darkness of the road, intensifying the illusion of it being a deep and narrow cleft be-

tween towering cliffs. A wide door stood open, and Brooks paused to contemplate the entrance. A vast pillared hall stretched away, seemingly to infinity, its further extremity shrouded in a luminous haze. Bales and crates filled it, arranged in fantastic piles suggesting the curious grouping of some futurist architect. And, from the open door came a strange heart-stirring scent, conveying subtly the whole magic of the East.

Inspector Brooks smiled as he inhaled it. He knew the hall for what it was, merely one of the warehouses surrounding St. Katherine Dock. But how little Londoners knew of the marvels of their own city! Here, not more than three or four miles from the fastidious Western civilisation of Woodbridge Square, was this dark canyon, fringed with the treasure-houses of the world.

It was early yet, too early for the work which he had planned for himself. He walked on slowly, until he came to the entrance of London Dock. Here he paused again, leaning on the low wall which guarded the lock gates. On his right was the river, a constellation of lights; the riding lights of barges, the red and green side lights of the unnumbered craft which filled the Pool of London. On his left was the dock, a placid sheet of ebony coloured water, from which towered up a forest of tapering masts, faintly seen as a delicate tracery against the dim light of the sky.

It seemed to him as though the sea with all its mystery had thrust an intruding arm into the reluctant dominion of the land, crushing back before it all the squalor of narrow streets and crowded buildings. In the faint light, growing ever fainter, this dark illimitable expanse might have been some secret land-

locked harbour, where weary silent ships might find their resting-place.

Brooks pulled out his watch and sighed. Time was creeping on, his business lay not with the sea and its romance, but with the men who toiled and plotted unseen in the maze of narrow streets which spread away for miles north and south of the river. He walked briskly on into Wapping High Street, until he came to a small and unpretentious public house, with the unexpected sign of the Margate Jetty.

The windows of the bar were so low that he had no difficulty in looking down through them at the group round the counter. He sauntered past the place, his quick eyes scanning the customers within. He recognised some of them, and grunted softly with satisfaction. Then he turned sharply down a narrow alleyway, which ended in a flight of steps leading down into the turbid waters of the river.

He stood here for a few minutes, gazing abstractedly across to the opposite shore. The dim form of a motor-launch swept swiftly past him, cleaving the water silently, and making a wash which broke on the steps at his feet in a series of miniature waves. A police launch, bound on the same errand as himself, the protection of the millions to whom crime and criminals were as some romantic survival of the Middle Ages. Brooks smiled. Precious little romance about the life of a policeman, if the truth were known. Danger perhaps; it was the spice of danger that alone made tolerable the long hours of weary vigil. But romance, no.

With a shrug of his shoulders he cast these discursive thoughts behind him, and became once more the

single-minded searcher for information. He turned on his heel and made his way back to the Margate Jetty, entering it by a narrow door upon which was displayed the legend "Saloon Bar." He wished a cheery good-evening to the group of men assembled there, and walked up to the counter, behind which a woman in the early thirties was sitting by a cheerful fire, engaged upon some complicated exercises with a crochet hook.

She looked up as he approached. "Good-evening," she said brightly. "You don't mind if I finish my row, do you?"

"Hand it over and I'll finish it for you," replied Brooks. "A little variation in the pattern wouldn't hurt."

"Here you are then," said the girl, passing him the work. "Coo, if I couldn't crochet any faster than that, I shouldn't have anything to wear! No, stop it! Take care, you'll drop all the stitches——"

She snatched it back from him, and put it aside. "There, you don't catch me letting you have that again," she said. "The usual?"

Brooks nodded, and she put up a foaming glass of beer before him. He nodded to her, drank a few mouthfuls, and retired to a corner of the room. The Margate Jetty was more like an old-fashioned inn in the heart of the country than a London public house. The low and blackened ceiling was traversed by old oak beams, and the room was lighted by a couple of dim gas lights. Queer old prints shared the wall space with flaring advertisements of beer and cigarettes. The partition separating the saloon from the public bar was so low that, when standing up, Brooks could see over it without difficulty.

A single glance at the company told him all he

wished to know. The group of men in the saloon were obviously the skippers of barges, squat, muffled men who said little and absorbed their beer as though it were some solemn rite. In the public bar was a more nondescript collection; a couple of watermen, a few dock labourers and a sprinkling of lorry-drivers, waiting until it was time to go on night-shift. Four of these were playing darts to the accompaniment of much ribald chaff and the strains of an ancient gramophone. Brooks glanced at the clock. It was barely eight o'clock.

He sat quietly in his corner for a while, then approached the counter once more and beckoned to the girl. "I say, is the guv'nor in this evening?"

She glanced at him swiftly. "Yes, do you want to see him?" she replied.

Brooks nodded, and without a word she lifted the flap of the counter and let him through. He passed down a short passage, and opened the door of a small room, in which was a heavy, jovial-looking man, reading the racing columns of an evening paper. "Good-evening, Mr. Hopkins," said the Inspector.

"Why, good-evening, Mr. Brooks," exclaimed the man warmly. "Haven't seen you for weeks. Going to have a drink?"

"I've just had one outside, thanks," replied Brooks. "I was just wondering if I might sit in the old place for a bit. By the way, was Pussy Herridge in here last night?"

"Pussy? No, I haven't seen him since the night before last," replied Mr. Hopkins. "There was some of his pals in yesterday, though. Of course, you can sit where you like, Mr. Brooks."

"Right, I'll find my way, don't you worry," said the

Inspector. He picked up a chair and opened a door at the far end of the room. It led into a dark cupboard, but as soon as the door was opened, the noise of voices in the bar became suddenly more distinct. Brooks entered the cupboard, shut the door behind him, and sat himself down on the chair he had brought with him.

He had discovered this point of vantage years ago, when he was a sergeant in this district. The cupboard was used as a larder, and at some time, to give it ventilation, a series of holes had been pierced in the wooden partition which divided it from an alcove leading off the bar. The partition had subsequently been papered over on the bar side, which rendered the holes useless for ventilation purposes, without interfering with the value of the cupboard as a sound box.

The minutes passed very slowly in that confined space, until the Inspector began to fear that he was to be disappointed. This, he knew, was not the sole, though the favourite, rendezvous of the gang of which he suspected Pussy Herridge of being a member. But at last there came a sound of men entering the alcove, and the clink of their glasses.

Brooks could hear every word of their conversation, although it was carried on in subdued tones. The language they used was a queer *argot*, wholly incomprehensible to the ordinary person, but clear as crystal to the experienced Inspector. He smiled grimly once or twice, and stored away a stray fact or two, which might some day be put to a useful purpose, in his retentive memory. But for a while he heard no word of what he had come to learn.

The name came out suddenly in a pause in the conversation. "Pussy's late," said a laconic voice.

"Oh, he'll turn up, you bet," said another reassuringly. "He got the goods all right. Didn't you see the news in the paper? Daring burglary in Mayfair, famous Hardway diamonds stolen, and all that."

"Garn, he must have had a cushy job with a fog like that. Wonder where he's got to, though?"

"Well, he can't have been copped, or the paper would have said so. He'll be along presently."

"I'm not altogether happy about our Pussy," chimed in a voice which had not hitherto taken part in the discussion. "What if he's gone off with the stuff all on his own?"

"Pussy? Not he. He hasn't got the guts. He wouldn't dare double-cross us like that."

"No, but there's another thing," said the previous speaker. "We weren't the only ones that had our eyes on that job. Listen!"

There was a faint rustling as the men drew closer together. Then, in a whisper so faint that Brooks could scarcely hear the words, the voice continued: "Pussy was up against it. I didn't say anything, for fear he would get the wind up and back out. But I know what I know. There was some one else after the Hardway diamonds last night, and when that bloke wants a thing, he usually gets it."

"Who d'you mean?" whispered a voice anxiously.

"Why, the Funny Toff, who else?" was the reply which thrilled Inspector Brooks to the very centre of his being.

CHAPTER SIX

THE burglary at Woodbridge Square had taken place on Thursday evening. On the following Tuesday occurred an incident which sent a wave of horror through even the unemotional circles of Scotland Yard, and eclipsed in interest even the sensational disappearance of the Hardway diamonds.

Shortly after dark, P.C. Limmer, of the Middlesex Constabulary, was cycling towards Brentbridge, where he was stationed, along a cross-road between two of the main arteries which run from the westward towards London. Brentbridge itself, being only about fifteen miles from Hyde Park Corner, and lying on one of the main arterial roads, is a busy enough little place, but the flat country round it, largely devoted to market gardening, is pretty well deserted after dark. Constable Limmer, looking forward to the termination of his tour of duty, pedalled steadily onwards.

There was very little traffic on this particular cross-road, though a constant stream of vehicles, heavy and light, poured along the arterial roads on either side of it. The road was narrow and winding, running between low hedges, beyond which stretched interminable rows of winter greens. Limmer was within a couple of miles of his destination when he heard the imperious blare of an electric hooter behind him. He drew in to the side of the road and dismounted. Turning round he saw a pair of glaring head-lights advancing upon him at what seemed a terrific speed.

He drew his machine almost into the ditch. A huge vehicle, its details indistinguishable to his eyes, blinded by the glare, swept past him. Limmer, scandalised by this excessive speed on the narrow country lane, shouted to the driver to stop, but his voice was utterly drowned by the rattling of the lorry. As its tail light disappeared round a corner a few yards farther on, the outraged Limmer tried to distinguish the number. It seemed to be PK 8743.

Limmer took out his note-book, and began to make an entry by the light of his bicycle lamp. He could still hear the lorry roaring and pounding away in the distance, and he shrugged his shoulders philosophically. The driver must be drunk, to travel like that on so rough a road. Apart from the danger of the proceeding, he would certainly shake the lorry to pieces. And then, as if to justify his prediction, a crash came from the direction of the unseen lorry.

"Crikey, he's run into something!" muttered Limmer, as he jumped on his bicycle and set off down the road. But it was apparent that, whatever had happened, the lorry had not stopped. He could still hear it crashing along on its mad career, the noise growing gradually fainter in the distance.

Limmer turned the corner, his acetylene lamp casting a beam of light on the road before him. Something was lying there, right in the middle of the road, something massive and motionless. He rode up to it and dismounted. It was a bulky wooden packing-case, such as is used for the transport of pieces of machinery. It had fallen upside down, and was lying on its lid, which was firmly bolted on. Limmer tried to move it, but, although he was a

powerful man, he only succeeded in pushing it a few inches.

He regarded it for several moments in disgust. The thing was an obstruction, and might easily cause an accident if left where it was. It would have to be removed, there was no doubt about that. He bent down once more, and by dint of several minutes of hard work succeeded in moving it sufficiently near one side of the road to allow room for traffic to pass. Then he mounted his bicycle again, and rode on into Brentbridge.

Here he reported the incident to the sergeant. "All right, we'll trace the number, and run the chap in for driving to the danger of the public," said the latter. "As for this case he dropped, it's not our business, but we can't let it lie in the road all night. Get your tea, and then take a couple of chaps and an iron bar, and shove it into the ditch. If there's any address on it, we'll communicate with the owners."

Half an hour later Limmer set out with two more stalwart constables, and soon reached the spot where the case had fallen out of the lorry. The case itself was lying as Limmer had left it, and the three men set to work to move it towards the ditch. "Get the bar under it, and we'll roll it over," suggested Limmer.

"Lumme, it's heavy!" panted one of the others. "It's big enough to hold a couple of lamp-posts."

By the exercise of their united strength the three men succeeded in rolling the case first on its side, and finally on its base, so that the lid was upwards. "Here, stop a minute!" exclaimed Limmer. "There's an address of some kind on it."

One of the men produced an electric torch, and flashed it on to the case. The address was plain

enough, it was neatly stencilled in black paint. And as they read it, the three men uttered a simultaneous exclamation of astonishment. On the lid of the case was inscribed:

PERSONAL.

URGENT.

THE ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER
CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION DEPARTMENT
SCOTLAND YARD, S. W. 1.

"Well, that's a rum thing!" exclaimed Limmer. "Lucky I was about when this was dropped. I wonder what the hell's inside it?"

"Says 'personal'," suggested one of the others. "Perhaps it's a Christmas pudding for the Assistant Commissioner from some of his admirers. It's heavy enough. What are we going to do about it?"

"You two chaps stop here and keep an eye on it, while I ride back and tell the sergeant," replied Limmer.

After some argument, based upon the contention that the case was not likely to run away if left to itself, this course was agreed to. The sergeant, not best pleased at having three of his men engaged on a matter which did not concern him, snorted indignantly. "It's the Yard's business, not ours," he said. "I'll ring them up and tell them. The lorry ought to have got there by now, and the driver will find out that he's lost the case. We'll learn who he is that way, anyhow."

The sergeant went away to telephone. After a few minutes he returned. "The lorry hasn't turned up yet," he said. "If it arrives within the next hour or so, they'll send it back. If not, they'll send out a van of their own. Anyway, I can't spare half the Force

to watch the blasted thing. You get back there and stop till some one comes, and send the other two fellows in."

Limmer commenced his vigil without any great enthusiasm. He spent most of his time walking up and down the lane to keep himself warm, varying this exercise by sitting on the box and smoking a surreptitious cigarette. The hours passed slowly enough, and it was not until ten o'clock that the glare of approaching head-lights appeared.

The head-lights were those of a police-tender. The vehicle drew up beside him, and half a dozen men jumped out. It had evidently called at Brentbridge police station on its way. The driver of the tender inspected the case and whistled. "We're going to have a job with this!" he exclaimed. "Lucky I thought of picking up you fellows."

With some difficulty the case was picked up and deposited in the tender, which immediately drove off in the direction of London.

Sir Edric Conway had a flat in Whitehall Court, within a few hundred yards of his office. It was his habit to look in at Scotland Yard after dinner, in case any of the night staff should wish to report to him. On this Tuesday evening he had remained there longer than usual. He was leaving the building when an Inspector came up to him and saluted. "There's a big packing-case just been brought in for you, sir," he reported. "It's marked 'Personal' and 'Urgent.'"

"Personal? A packing-case marked 'Personal'?" replied Sir Edric. "That sounds queer. How did it get here?"

The Inspector gave a short account of how the case had been found. Sir Edric's curiosity was aroused.

"Where is the thing?" he asked. "I'll go and have a look at it."

The case had been deposited in a corner of the courtyard, and stood brightly illuminated by the rays of a powerful electric lamp. It was seven or eight feet long, three feet wide, and as many deep. The curious address showed up with startling distinctness on the unpainted wooden lid.

"Stores of some kind, I suppose," commented Sir Edric. "Curious that the lorry from which it was dropped has never turned up, though. I suppose the driver discovered his loss, and is still looking for it. But I can't understand why it is marked 'Personal.' The store-keeper's gone home, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir," replied the Inspector. "But I can easily fetch him, if you like."

"No, there's no point in turning him out at this time of the night," remarked Sir Edric. He bent down and examined the lid with an air of curiosity. It was held down by a dozen nuts, screwed on to bolts projecting from the woodwork of the case.

"I confess that I'd like to know what's inside it," said Sir Edric after a pause. "It wouldn't take long to unscrew those nuts. See if you can get hold of a man who knows how to use a spanner, Inspector."

The driver of the tender was standing by, and the Inspector turned to him. "You've got a spanner in your tool-kit, haven't you?" he asked.

The spanner was produced, and the driver set to work to unscrew the nuts. This corner of the courtyard was empty, but for Sir Edric and his two assistants, standing under the glare of the electric light. The nuts were removed one by one, until at last the lid was free. The Inspector and the driver between

them lifted it off and laid it on the ground. The interior of the case was packed with straw.

"Looks as if it were something fragile, in which case it's bound to have been broken when the case fell off the lorry," commented Sir Edric. "Since we've gone so far, we'd better see. Let's have some of that straw out."

The straw was removed in handfuls, and piled by the side of the case. "Seems to be something fairly soft, sir," remarked the Inspector after a while. "I can feel something like a bale of cloth——"

He collected an armful of the straw, and lifted it out of the case. As he did so, he started back in amazement. "Why, good Lord, sir, it's a man!" he exclaimed.

Sir Edric stepped quickly forward and peered down into the case. At the same moment the driver removed the last of the straw, revealing the rigid form of Inspector Brooks, stone dead, and with an awful expression of mortal terror upon his face.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DICK PENHAMPTON was a man of many interests, though Mayfair society had quite made up its mind that it knew all about him. Not that he ever volunteered any information about himself. But Daphne Hardway, if approached, would always be frank about her brother. According to her, he was an expert in one particular science, the science of living with the minimum of trouble to himself.

He practised this science to perfection. Very few people guessed that behind the blasé air of the man about town was a keen and tireless brain, and an energy carefully conserved for anything that was worth doing. Sir Edric Conway and Lord Hardway both knew it. Daphne Hardway, secretly devoted to her brother, admired him for his possession of gifts which puzzled her. And Alison Weatherleigh the daughter of that distinguished antiquary, Dr. Weatherleigh, was beginning to suspect that Dick was not altogether the cheerful *flaneur* that he appeared to be.

Among Dick's eccentricities was that of being an early riser. On the Wednesday morning he breakfasted at half-past seven, and then sat down to write in his austere looking room in Marquis Street. He had barely covered a sheet of notepaper in his rapid, rather angular hand, when the clamour of the telephone bell caused him to throw down his pen in disgust.

He picked up the instrument. "Well?" he inquired.

"Scotland Yard speaking, sir," was the reply. "Is that Mr. Penhampton? Will you hold on a minute, sir? The Assistant Commissioner would like to speak to you, sir. I'll switch you through, sir——"

A short pause, then Sir Edric's voice. "That you Dick? Sorry to trouble you, but I'd be awfully obliged if you could slip round here and see me. Yes, at once. I want to tell you something, before the news gets into the papers."

"I'll be along in ten minutes," replied Dick.

He was as good as his word. A taxi dropped him at the Yard within the stipulated period, and he was immediately shown into Sir Edric's presence. The two men greeted one another, and Sir Edric plunged into his story without wasting time on preliminaries.

"Inspector Brooks has been murdered," he said. "I think that there is very little doubt that the murder is connected with the theft of the Hardway diamonds."

Dick nodded, and Sir Edric proceeded to give a detailed account of the events of the previous evening. "Of course, we got our own medical man to look at the body," he continued. "His report is rather curious. Poor Brooks was suffocated by carbon dioxide gas, and he had been dead for at least twenty-four hours before we found his body."

"Carbon dioxide, eh?" remarked Dick. "That's the stuff they use in the ordinary lethal chamber. It isn't poisonous, it merely causes death because it won't support life, so to speak. Easy enough to get hold of, too. Mineral water manufacturers use quantities of it, for instance. You buy it compressed in steel cylinders. Twenty-four hours. Let's see, that would

take us back to Monday evening. Where was Brooks then?"

"That's just what we don't know," replied Sir Edric, with a trace of irritation. "Brooks had his own way of going about a job, and never spoke of his suspicions or intentions if he could help it. As it happens, on Friday last I told him to drop everything else, and concentrate on the business of the diamonds. The last person in the Yard who spoke to him was one of his colleagues, Inspector Pollard. And all we know of Brooks's movements is what he told him."

Sir Edric paused. "I've been spending the night trying to follow up the clues," he continued. "Brooks asked Pollard to secure the release of a man called Herridge, who was arrested in Pentonville late on Thursday night, and to have him very carefully shadowed. Herridge was arrested in very curious circumstances, but I needn't trouble you with that story now. Although Brooks never said so, I have reason to think that he suspected Herridge of having been the burglar, although, of course, the diamonds were not in his possession when he was arrested."

"Brooks's idea being to use him as a decoy, of course?" suggested Dick.

"Exactly," replied Sir Edric. "Pollard secured his release on Monday morning, and he has been closely watched ever since. So far, he hasn't led us to the diamonds, and he certainly had no hand in the murder of Brooks. The only other thing that Brooks told Pollard is that he was going to Wapping on Friday evening, where he hoped to pick up a clue. We have discovered that Brooks spent the evening at a public house in Wapping called the Margate Jetty, and that

he left there at closing time. The landlord, who is an intelligent chap, thinks that he was following three men, whose names he does not know, and who were in the bar that evening. Since then, all trace of Brooks is lost."

"I see. What about the lorry from which the case was dropped?" said Dick quietly.

Sir Edric shrugged his shoulders. "Very little hope there, I'm afraid," he replied. "The constable who found the case saw nothing of the lorry. It was dark, and it passed him like a flash, he says. He maintains, however, that he read its number; PK 8743, he says it was. Now there are no such registration letters as PK. We tried BK 8743, BK being the Portsmouth letters, but BK 8743 is an Austin Seven belonging to the owner of a fish and chip shop in Commercial Road, Portsmouth, and it was not on the road at all on Friday night. Besides, the lorry driver may have changed his numbers soon after dropping the case."

Dick lighted a cigarette, and puffed at it slowly for several minutes without speaking. "This is a bigger business than burglary," he said at last. "If I know anything of Hardway, he would willingly sacrifice the diamonds to bring the murderer to book. As I see it, Brooks was on the track of the man who had the diamonds, and was murdered for his pains. And that man was no ordinary criminal."

He paused again, but Sir Edric made no remark. The Assistant Commissioner, though one of the ablest men who had ever occupied that post, had no false ideas as to the infallibility of the official mind. He knew Dick's innate shrewdness, and he was anxious

to test the reaction of the facts upon the outside observer.

"The sending of the body to you can only be a gesture of defiance," continued Dick. "No ordinary criminal would indulge in such a luxury, nor would he think of so neat a way of disposing of the body. Of course, the body carries no clue with it? I needn't ask that, for a criminal of that calibre, I imagine, would be too great an artist to botch his work in that way. How much of all this are you going to make public?"

"As little as we can," replied Sir Edric. "Nobody but the police knows anything of the matter, so it will not be difficult to keep things quiet. Brooks was unmarried, and his next-of-kin is a brother in New Zealand. We shall hold the inquest here—the coroner can sit without a jury—and nothing must be said, at least for a time."

"Quite right. Keep the other side guessing as far as possible," said Dick. "It's very good of you to let me know the truth, Conway. You may be quite sure that I shan't let it go any further."

Dick returned to his rooms, a set expression upon his usually inexpressive face. He could not rid himself of the unpleasant feeling that the diamonds had been the cause of the Inspector's death, and that in some remote way he shared the responsibility. At the bottom of his heart he found a half-savage satisfaction in the fact that the criminal's challenge had, in some degree, been thrown at his own feet.

He spent the rest of the morning pacing his room abstractedly, until one o'clock struck. Then, with a sudden smile, which seemed to change the whole man,

he left Marquis Street and strolled along Piccadilly to the Berkeley.

Dick arrived at the entrance just in time to step forward as a taxi drew up and a girl descended from it. Alison Weatherleigh was a remarkably pretty girl, remarkable even in London, where the standard of prettiness is high. But at a second glance you noticed something beyond mere prettiness. There was that about her features, and especially about her grey eyes, which gave you an impression of decision, and of a determination to carry out that decision to the end.

She smiled at Dick, and without a word the two walked to the table reserved for them in the restaurant. They had this in common, that neither of them had the habit of wasting words. It was not until their lunch had been ordered that Alison made any attempt to embark upon conversation.

"I had a letter from father this morning," she said. "I mention the fact, because the incident is so unusual."

"I'm not fond of writing letters myself," replied Dick. "Is this a peremptory demand by an outraged parent that his erring daughter should return at once to Lestridge Hall?"

"Not it!" exclaimed Alison. "Father says that he is very busy, and hopes that I am enjoying my stay with Aunt Edith. He may have to come up to town for a few days on business. He probably wants to look for Roman remains in Piccadilly Circus, or something thrilling like that."

"I shouldn't wonder," replied Dick, "I hope I shall get back before he leaves."

Something like a look of disappointment flashed across Alison's face. "Get back?" she repeated, with

a well-assumed note of indifference. "Are you going away, then? Rather a sudden resolution, isn't it? I thought you said you were coming to Aunt Edith's dance on Friday?"

Dick's eyes twinkled. He had, as a matter of fact, completely forgotten that engagement. His interview with Sir Edric had completely put it out of his head. And he knew that it was no good trying to make excuses to Alison.

"That, to use the vernacular, has torn it," he replied. "Now, I can only confess that something has happened this morning which put Friday night completely out of my mind, and has made it necessary for me to leave town for a bit."

Alison looked at him speculatively. "Now, let me see what it can be," she said in mocking tones. "Has she found out your address and threatened to bring an action for breach of promise? Or has some long-suffering tailor installed a solid and unsympathetic bailiff in your rooms? No, I don't think that it's either of those things, somehow. I know! It's something to do with Daphne's diamonds."

Dick glanced furtively round the room. As it happened there was nobody he knew at any of the surrounding tables. "You've hit it, Alison," he replied quietly. "There has been a most extraordinary development of that business. Now, look here. If I'm to do any good, it is essential that nobody should know the reason for my departure. I want you not to say a word to anybody of what you have guessed."

Alison nodded. "Very well," she said. "I won't even ask you any questions. But there's just this, Dick. I'm a person to be trusted. I've done lots of little confidential jobs for father, when he was anx-

ious for no one to know of his finds until the results were published. If you want anybody in London to lend you a hand, you've only got to drop a line to me."

"Good girl!" exclaimed Dick. "To tell you the truth, I don't want Daphne to know anything yet, and if I say a word to Hardway, he's sure to blurt it out to her. I don't want even the police to know what I'm up to; they might think it their duty to interfere. I want to have a shot at something on my own."

"How delightfully thrilling!" exclaimed Alison. "I'd love to be in at the death, but I suppose you won't let me. But remember, if you want to communicate with anybody, I'm the girl."

"I shall remember that," replied Dick gravely. And there was something in his voice which made Alison look swiftly down to her plate, and take a sudden interest in her food.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DICK PENHAMTON had fully made up his mind, and, as was his nature, his decision had been made almost instantaneously. Inspector Brooks had been murdered, as was pretty obvious, by a very unusual type of criminal.

Now Dick had a very genuine admiration for the efficiency of Sir Edric and the Force which he controlled. But he could not resist the impression that Scotland Yard was organised for war against the ordinary criminal type, and that a mind rather different from that of the trained detective would be required, if the murderer was to be brought to book. This mind he might or might not possess. But in any case, he was resolved to put it to the test.

There was yet another consideration which influenced him. The ordinary detective was handicapped by the fact that he would almost certainly be known to the men through whom this master-criminal worked, men of the type of Pussy Herridge. Dick, himself, though a prominent and well-known figure within the narrow limits of Mayfair, was pretty sure to escape recognition in any other part of London. Disguise he set aside as impracticable, and certain to lead to suspicion. He did not feel equal to assuming a disguise that would not betray itself as such at close quarters. And close quarters were exactly what he had determined to seek.

After parting from Alison, he returned to his rooms,

and looked very carefully through his extensive wardrobe. This done to his satisfaction, he rang for his man, Jerry Gould, who had served with him through the war, and was almost more a trusted friend than a servant.

"Look here, Jerry, is there any part of this town that you don't know?" he asked.

Jerry scratched his head. "Well, as I've told you, sir, I was born and bred in 'Ackney," he replied. "There's not much of London north of the river as I don't know my way about in fairly well."

"Ah, but south of the river?" inquired Dick, pulling a map of London out of a drawer and spreading it on the desk before him. "Take Walworth, now. Do you know anybody who lives in that direction?"

"Can't say as how I do, sir," replied Jerry, with a puzzled expression. "Bar having a drink or two at the Elephant I don't know as I've ever been there."

"Then it's pretty certain that you won't be recognised there. I certainly shan't, for I've never been nearer to it than London Bridge station. Now, look here, Jerry. I've got something on, and you've got to do what I tell you without asking questions. I want you to go to Walworth now, and take a couple of rooms in some back street. You are a respectable man with a small pension, and you want somewhere where you can be comfortable. I don't care what yarn you spin, as long as you don't mention your name or mine. No questions will be asked, if you pay in advance. Take a few things of your own with you, but nothing that could give any clue to who you are or where you come from. Here's some money. Off you go, and come back here as soon as you've arranged it."

Jerry, with an ill-suppressed grin, departed on his errand, and Dick employed the time until his return in writing a series of notes, to his sister and other of his familiars, explaining that he had been called out of town at short notice and expected to be away for some days. He then dressed himself in an old but carefully pressed blue serge suit, and selected a pair of shoes which he had discarded and which showed considerable signs of wear. His pockets were empty, except for some small change.

Thus equipped, he waited for Jerry's return. It was nearly six o'clock when that discreet individual entered the room with a triumphant expression.

"Well, did you have any luck?" asked Dick.

"I think I've found what you wanted, sir," replied Jerry. "But I had to look round a bit. I've got a couple of rooms, back kitchen and bedroom above, at 32 Mellin Street, just off the Walworth Road, sir. Belongs to a painter, whose wife does a bit of charing. Man's out of work, and they was glad to get hold of a lodger. Decent people, by what I could see of them, sir."

"Capital!" exclaimed Dick. "You ought to find it a pretty comfortable billet. Now listen. From this moment I am Captain Blackwood. You knew me in the old days in the army, when I brought you back wounded out of No-man's-land. I was cashiered after the war, because I couldn't pay my mess-bill. Bit of a bad hat all round, in fact. All the same, though you've never seen me since I saved your life, you are grateful. Understand, Jerry?"

"Yes, sir, I understand," replied Jerry.

"Right. If we happen to meet in Walworth, you'll know how to behave. Now then, cut along

and dig yourself in at Mellin Street. You'd better find the nearest pub and have a drink or two there, but be back home by ten o'clock. It won't hurt if you yarn a bit in the pub, as long as you don't tell the truth by mistake. By the way, what's your name to be?"

"Sid Evans, sir," replied Jerry gravely. "My mother was an Evans before she married my father."

"Very well, Evans, off you go. Don't forget what I've told you, and don't give the game away."

"I'll see to that, sir," replied the newly christened Sid Evans. He turned to leave the room, but paused on reaching the door. "Beg pardon, sir, but are we going to do a bit of campaigning?" he asked.

"We are going to do a bit of campaigning," replied Dick gravely.

Half an hour after his servant's departure, Dick summoned a taxi, and drove to Cannon Street station. From here he took a train to Stepney, where he alighted. He had studied the map very carefully, and set out to walk towards Wapping. He chose this devious means of approach, since he wished to run no risk of his journey being traced.

As he walked through the main streets of dockland, he looked the part he had elected to play, that of the broken-down gentleman. His habitually melancholy expression was intensified, and he took care that it should not be belied by his observant eyes. His rather battered hat was jammed down over his forehead, and he slouched along with his hands in his pockets, dragging his feet with an air of hopeless weariness. If, by some miracle, any of his Mayfair associates had met him, they would not have dreamt of recognising the immaculate, alert Dick Penhampton.

He had no difficulty in finding the Margate Jetty, and, after a moment of hesitation, he pushed open the door of the public bar and walked in. His first act was to glance furtively round the room, avoiding the eyes of the men assembled there. He then stepped up to the counter, and in a husky voice asked for a double gin, slapping down a two-shilling piece with a defiant gesture. Pushing aside the bottle of water which the barmaid offered him, he picked up his change and carried his drink to a bench in the corner.

Here he sat, sipping his gin, and unobtrusively watching the customers who came in. He had a keen eye for character, and they all seemed to him to be respectable working men. For the most part they stood or sat round the room, singly or in groups, drinking their beer to the accompaniment of harmless conversations in the purest cockney. It was impossible that any of these men should be even the humblest members of a gang of criminals. But Brooks, whose expert knowledge could not have been at fault, had chosen the Margate Jetty as his starting-place. Dick wondered whether some successor of his was watching the place. It seemed almost certain, and Dick felt a momentary annoyance at the thought. It might possibly complicate matters. But, in any case, it couldn't be helped. Anyhow, he would not be recognised. He was not known to any of the detectives on the staff.

He resumed his watchful attitude, scanning the faces of all those who entered. Shortly before nine o'clock, two men came in together, and having ordered whisky, sat down at a table in the corner of the room, close by his own bench. They glanced at Dick, and one of the men said something to the

other in a low tone. In a few minutes a third man came in, a powerful-looking fellow in the blue jersey and coat of a bargee. He ordered his drink, nodded to the first two, and joined them at their table, where they sat a while engaged in earnest conversation.

After a while, their glasses were empty, and the last-comer rose to carry them to the counter for replenishment. In doing so, he lurched against Dick, spilling the remains of his gin on the floor. He immediately turned round with a gruff apology.

"Sorry, mate," he said, "'ere, give us your glass, and 'ave another with me."

"Don't mind if I do," replied Dick wearily. "Gin, it was."

The man refilled his glass, and put it on the table where his friends were sitting. "You looks a bit lonely, guv'nor," he said. "Better join us."

Dick shook his head. "No use," he replied bitterly. "I haven't got the price of a round of drinks."

"Bit down on your luck, eh?" said the man. "Never mind, we ain't the chaps to see a pal go thirsty. Come along!"

Dick rose heavily and sat down at the table with the other three. "Here's luck!" he said, lifting his glass and draining half the gin at a gulp. He laid the glass down again, and laughed shortly. "Luck!" he exclaimed. "Mine's dead out."

The three men glanced at one another significantly. "Finish that up and have another, mate," said one of the two who had not yet spoken. "Nothing like a glass or two to cheer you up."

Dick did as he was told, and another glass was soon beside him. "Lost your job, Guv'nor?" asked the bargee.

"Lost my job!" exclaimed Dick, whose tongue seemed to be loosened by the liquor. "Haven't had a job since I was kicked out of the army, years ago. Had a bit to live on, but that soon went. Since then, I've been staying with my brother-in-law. But we quarrelled over a wad of notes he said he'd lost, and I left his house. Devilish rude he was about it."

Again that significant glance between the three. "Don't find it easy to get a job as would suit you," remarked one of them incuriously. "Any one can see as you've been a toff, mister."

"Ah, that's the trouble," replied Dick confidentially. "I want a job for my brain, not my muscles, and I'm not particular what it is. You don't catch me asking questions, so long as I've enough to live on. I'm not what you might call squeamish. I don't mind telling you fellows that I've done a few queer things in my time."

"Aye, I dessay. We all has to turn our hands to what comes along," said the bargee. "Where are you going to doss down when this place shuts?"

"I know a man in Walworth who'll put me up for a night or two," replied Dick. "Decent, honest fellow of the name of Evans. That's been my only stroke of luck to-day. Met a fellow in Stepney who told me he'd seen him to-day. He's just moved into a house; 32 Mellin Street, Walworth, his address is."

He leant back in his chair and closed his eyes. The three men whispered together, their voices drowned by the sound of a raucous song played by the gramophone. After some minutes Dick opened his eyes again, to find a newly filled glass at his elbow.

The bargee leant across the table towards him and looked at him fixedly. "See here!" he said. "I don't

know anything about you and I don't care. But I'll tell you this. My boss was a-lookin' for a chap like you, what had a head on his shoulders and could keep his nose out o' things that don't concern him. I'll speak to him to-morrow."

"Gad, you're a good fellow!" exclaimed Dick thickly. "Jolly good of you, and all that. Where does this boss of yours live? I'll go and see him first thing."

"Not much you don't!" replied the bargee. "My boss isn't a chap you can just walk up to like that. And I'll tell you this, don't you try to play no tricks with 'im, or you'll wish you'd died nice and quick. Now what's your name, mate?"

"Captain Blackwood," said Dick. "Sorry I haven't got a card to give you."

"Right. Now you cut along to this chap Evans in Walworth. If my boss wants to see you, you'll hear from him."

Half an hour later Dick knocked at the door of Number 32 Mellin Street. It was opened, with rather suspicious haste, by Jerry. "Why, blimey if it isn't Captain Blackwood!" he exclaimed, with well-feigned amazement. "Is there anything I can do for you, sir? Come in!"

He led the way to the back kitchen, where Dick collapsed into a chair. "For heaven's sake give me something long and cool to drink, Evans!" he exclaimed in a whisper. "I've been drinking raw gin till I've got no skin left on my throat."

"That's all right, sir," replied Jerry with a wink. "I've got a dozen of Bass in the cupboard."

CHAPTER NINE

THE house in Mellin Street fully justified Jerry's choice. The painter and his wife displayed no inquisitiveness as to their lodgers, who found themselves free to come and go without incurring the observation of prying eyes. Not that Dick stirred from the back kitchen. He made himself thoroughly comfortable there by the gas fire, and sent Jerry out upon the household errands.

"It's like this, you see, Evans," he said. He insisted upon the use of the names they had decided upon, even when there was no chance of their being overheard. "I'm sponging on you till I get the offer of a job. There's a chance of one being offered to me in a day or two, and till then I'm going to stay where I am."

The summons came earlier than Dick had ventured to hope. It was barely six o'clock on the evening following his visit to the Margate Jetty, when a vigorous hammering on the house door disturbed the quiet of the lodgings in Mellin Street. "Go and see who that is, Evans," said Dick quickly. "I shouldn't wonder if it was for me."

Jerry opened the door, to find a ragged urchin standing on the step, shrilly whistling an air which had lately become popular. The boy looked at him appraisingly, finished the air, and asked abruptly: "You Captain Blackwood?"

"Captain Blackwood's inside. What d'you want with him, sonny?" asked Jerry.

"Got a message for him from his grandmother," replied the urchin. "Trot him out and let's look at him, cully."

"Better come inside and give it to him," said Jerry. "And don't you give me any of your sauce, or you'll find yourself with a thick ear. Come on inside. Sharp, now, I can't wait here all day."

The boy, carefully keeping out of Jerry's reach, shook his head. "No fear, I'm not coming inside," he replied. "'Ow do I know you wouldn't pinch my wallet? I'll stop here while you fetches the bloomin' Captain."

Jerry slammed the door in his face, and went back to report to Dick, who laughed with genuine amusement. "I told you not to be astonished at anything that might happen, Evans," he said. "All right, I'll go and interview this young limb of Satan."

The urchin, who had resumed his whistling, subjected Dick to the same careful scrutiny which he had bestowed upon Jerry. The result seemed to satisfy him, for he raised his hand in a mock salute. "Evening, Captain," he said pleasantly. "You're wanted over yonder in Wapping. Corner of Creek Street." And without waiting for a reply, he ran off.

Dick returned to the back kitchen. "I'm off after my job, Evans," he said. "I can't say when I shall be back, but you had better stay in these rooms till you hear from me. I'm not going to tell you any more, so that if anybody comes here and asks you where I am, you can truthfully say you don't know."

"Very good, sir," replied Jerry. And then, rather

longingly: "You don't happen to be going anywhere where there's any chance of a scrap, sir?"

"No, it hasn't come to that yet," said Dick. "If it comes to scrapping, I'll take you with me."

He set off to walk sharply in the direction of Wapping, with a pleasant thrill of anticipation. He had guessed that the three men whom he had met on the previous evening were not what they seemed. They were either detectives, or members of some criminal gang who haunted the Margate Jetty for a definite purpose. And it seemed to him highly probable that the latter assumption was correct. It was difficult to understand why three police officers should be necessary to watch so insignificant a public house.

If they were members of a gang, then it was highly probable that he was on the way to learn something. Whether that something would be of any use to him in his quest for the murderer of Inspector Brooks it was impossible to say. But, if he played his cards well, he believed that he might at least gain some knowledge of the personnel of the underworld, a very necessary step upon the path which he had marked out for himself.

Creek Street proved to be a narrow thoroughfare, lined on both sides by squalid looking houses, leading off Wapping High Street. There were not many people about when Dick reached the place, and he looked in vain for any of his acquaintances of the previous night. He turned the corner and slouched up the dark street, eagerly scanning the shadows for any sign of those who had sent him the message. Reflecting that he had no instructions as to which corner was intended, he walked the whole length of the street, till he reached

the farther end, and found himself on the outskirts of a labyrinth of gloomy dwellings, among which meandered evil-smelling alleyways, dimly lighted by infrequent lamp-posts. Here he rested for a few minutes, propped against a wall, his hands in his pockets and his head sunk upon his breast, the very picture of worthlessness.

From out of the darkness came a man, sauntering towards him. He might have been one of his acquaintances of the Margate Jetty; Dick could not tell for certain. The man passed him so closely as to brush against him. "You're wanted at Number 45," he said, without raising his head or pausing. "Open the door and walk in."

Without a word Dick began to walk slowly back along Creek Street. Number 45 turned out to be even more dilapidated than its neighbours. The plaster with which it had once been faced had fallen away in great irregular patches, exposing the grimy and irregular brick-work beneath. Not a pane in any of the windows was whole, they having evidently served as targets for the youth of Wapping. The door, level with the pavement, had long ago lost all vestige of paint and seemed to hang precariously upon its rusted hinges. It was easy to see that the house was untenanted and condemned.

With a rapid glance round him, Dick pushed open the door. It yielded to his touch, with a melancholy creaking. He found himself in utter darkness, but guessed that he was in a narrow passage. The whole place reeked of damp and of disuse; Dick fancied that he heard the scuttling of rats somewhere around his feet. He felt a sudden urgent desire for light, for anything to reveal the horrors by which he felt him-

self surrounded. But, true to the part which he was playing, he had not brought even a match-box.

He advanced cautiously a few steps along the passage, testing each creaking board with his feet before he trusted his weight upon it. The house seemed empty, and he stopped suddenly, fearing that he might be advancing into some trap. And, as he did so, he heard the voice.

It was impossible to tell the direction from which it came. It echoed, hollow and menacing, among the bare walls and uncarpeted floors. But the tone of it was harsh and imperious, the tone of a man who is accustomed to have his orders obeyed without hesitation or question. "The back room, on your left," it said.

Dick groped blindly along the wall, until he found the door. The handle was damp and clammy to his fingers; a shudder of repugnance ran through him at its slimy touch. With a definite effort of will he turned it and opened the door.

The room was in utter darkness, a darkness thicker, if possible, than that of the passage he had just left. With faltering steps he advanced into it, feeling the rotten boards sinking beneath his feet as he did so. And then suddenly, from close at hand, as it seemed, came again the ringing but curiously muffled sound of the voice. "Stay where you are!"

Dick obeyed, and stood still, his eyes trying vainly to pierce the utter blackness before him. If the room had a window, it had been blocked up, and not a glimmer of light could be seen anywhere. Dick waited expectantly.

That happening was so sudden and unexpected that he could not restrain a sharp cry of amazement. A

brilliant flash, as though the house had been struck by lightning, filled the whole room for a fraction of a second, leaving behind it a darkness seeming even more profound than before. Dick felt as though he had been suddenly blinded. He seemed for an instant to have seen the outline of the room, empty but for a black curtain stretched across its farther end with something that might have been a table in front of it.

Before he had recovered from his surprise, the voice spoke again. "Your name?" it inquired sharply.

"Captain Blackwood," replied Dick unfalteringly.

"What can you do?" asked the voice.

Faced by this sudden question, Dick hesitated. "I've tried most things," he replied at last. "I can't say that I've made much of a success of any of them. I shouldn't be looking for a job now, if I had."

"You are, in fact, a waster," said the voice dispassionately. "Without the energy to earn your own living honestly, or the courage to earn it dishonestly."

"I've courage enough, if the opportunity came along," muttered Dick resentfully.

"That remains to be proved, should the opportunity present itself," said the voice, in a tone of scorn. "Now, listen to me. I could have my pick of a thousand men, with more courage and ability in their little fingers than you have in your whole body. But I happen to want a man who can pass for a gentleman, and can speak like one. Is it so long since you were a gentleman that you have forgotten the art?"

"I don't talk altogether like the average cockney, do I?" replied Dick truculently.

"No, your speech is in your favour, certainly," said the voice. "That is why I agreed to receive

you. It would not surprise me, however, if your idea was to go straight to the police when you left here, in the hope of cadging some reward from them. Believe me, you have my full permission to do so. But, if you will take my advice, you will do nothing of the kind. Such a procedure might have a most damaging effect upon your health."

There was a suggestion of such menace in the voice that Dick shuddered in spite of himself. But before he could reply, the voice continued.

"Perhaps, though, you are afraid of the police. I have no doubt that there are many acts of petty meanness on your conscience which would not bear inquiry. A most unpleasant predicament. But do not imagine for a moment that I share your fear of the police. I have always found them the most estimable body of men. I believe, however, that some of the men who obey me have been unfortunate enough to get on the wrong side of them, and they might resent any communication between you and their natural enemies. I have frequently been amused by the results of their resentment."

The voice broke off into a peal of laughter, so sinister that Dick's blood ran cold at the sound of it. It echoed through the room, sardonic and terrible, like the laughter of demons in the nethermost pit. And then, just as Dick had reached the limit of endurance, it ceased as abruptly as it had begun.

"That's only just by way of warning," continued the voice. "If you bear that in mind, I think you may possibly do. You will receive further instructions in due course. When you get them, you will carry them out at once, and without question. Now, take a couple of steps forward, until you come to the

table. Put your hand on it, and you will find your first week's pay in advance."

Dick did as he was told. The top of the table was sticky with filth beneath his touch. He fumbled about on it in the darkness, until his fingers came to a packet of notes, which he put in his pocket.

"Now!" exclaimed the voice. "Go back and sponge on that friend of yours in Walworth until I want you."

Without a word, Dick turned and groped his way towards the door. He reached it, and found his way into the passage. Suddenly, behind him, the blood-curdling laughter rang out again, peal after peal, threatening him, mocking his powerlessness. He almost ran to the door of the house, and slammed it behind him. But he could not rid his ears of the sound. All the way back to Walworth it rang in his head, above the roar and rattle of the traffic.

Jerry answered his knock and admitted him. "Anything wrong, sir?" he asked anxiously when they were safely in the back kitchen. "You look a bit upset, sir, if you'll forgive the liberty."

Dick shuddered. "I've heard the devils laugh in hell," he replied shortly.

CHAPTER TEN

MELLIN STREET was all very well in its way, but the amenities of the back kitchen scarcely provided sufficient occupation for Dick's restless mind. He had put his hand to the plough, and, although he confessed to himself that he had been shaken by his adventure in Wapping, he had no intention of abandoning his quest.

Besides, the very fact that the unknown man had paid him for a week in advance seemed to prove that he would receive a further summons from him. He took the notes out of his pocket, and examined them closely. There were five of them, all old and crumpled, and it was obvious that they had been so long in circulation that there was no hope of tracing them. All he could do was to wait.

He fidgeted about the back kitchen, with ill-concealed impatience, until about one o'clock. Then, since no message had come for him, he announced to Jerry his intention of going out. "I shall be back this evening before six," he said. "If anybody comes to see me before then, you can take a message or tell them to come back. I can't stop here doing nothing."

Dick left the house, took a tube at the Elephant and Castle, and got out at Charing Cross, where he hailed a taxi, and told the man to drive to his rooms. He felt pretty certain that he had not been followed. Even supposing that the gang with which he had got in touch desired to keep him under observation, they

were scarcely likely to run the risk of tracking him across London. Nor did he see any one who could recognise him as he hurried into the house.

His first action was to go into his dressing-room and discard the shabby garments of Captain Blackwood. He had divested himself of these, and was engaged in selecting an attire more suitable to the fastidious Dick Penhampton, when there came a peremptory knock on the outer door.

Dick swore under his breath. This was an infernal nuisance. He was supposed to be out of town, and he was not at all anxious for any of his inquisitive friends to discover his whereabouts. His first instinct was not to answer the door, in the hope that the caller would abandon his attempt. But then it struck him that whoever it was might have seen him drive up in the taxi! On the whole, it would be better to let him in, and concoct some story to account for his sudden return.

He slipped on a dressing-gown, and opened the door. On the threshold stood an apologetic little man, in a bowler hat and a thick overcoat. He looked as though he had called about the rent, or some such prosaic matter. But, since the door was open, there was no other course but to let him in.

"Come inside," said Dick abruptly. "I've only a moment or two to spare——"

"I am very sorry to trouble you, Mr. Penhampton," said the man, as he followed Dick into the room. "I would not have called, had I known that it was an inconvenient time."

He proffered a card, which Dick glanced at in astonishment. It bore the words: "Detective-Inspector Pollard, C.I.D."

"Sit down, Inspector," said Dick, rather more quietly. "You're lucky to catch me. I've only come up to town for an hour or two. What can I do for you?"

"I am investigating the case of Lady Hardway's diamonds, sir," replied Pollard. "The unfortunate death of Inspector Brooks has left us ignorant of certain essential facts, and the Assistant Commissioner told me that I could apply to you for a few particulars."

"I'll tell you what I can, of course," said Dick. "But wouldn't it be better for you to go to Woodbridge Square and see Lord and Lady Hardway? They know more about the business than I do."

"Well, it's like this, you see, sir," replied Pollard. "As you know, Inspector Brooks made full inquiries the day after the burglary. If I were to repeat these inquiries, his lordship might become impatient. He is not at present aware of the death of Inspector Brooks."

"I see," said Dick with a smile. "Well, fire away, Inspector, I'll answer any questions I can."

Pollard made a few inquiries as to the safe and the occupants of the house in Woodbridge Square, to which Dick replied to the best of his ability. Pollard thanked him, and then, taking out a note-book and pencil, handed them to Dick. "There's one thing more, sir," he said. "You are familiar with the appearance of the necklace, I suppose? It would be of the greatest help to me if you would draw a rough sketch of it."

"I'm not much of a draughtsman, I'm afraid," replied Dick, as he took the book. "It was something like this."

He sat down, and in a few minutes produced a very creditable sketch of the missing necklace, which Polard studied with a look of admiration. "I did not hope for anything as good as this, sir," he said. "I'm sure I'm very grateful to you. Now I don't think that I need waste your time any further."

He bowed himself out, and Dick returned to his dressing-room to complete his toilet. This effected, he took up the telephone, and, after a moment's hesitation, asked for Alison's number.

His expression changed as he heard her voice in reply. "Dick speaking," he said. "Don't tell your aunt or anybody that it's me. I don't want anybody to know that I'm in town. Any chance of meeting you somewhere quietly this afternoon?"

"I'm afraid there isn't," she replied regretfully. "I heard again from father this morning. He's coming up to London to-day, and wants me to meet him. He's going to the Hotel Magnificent, and wants me to meet him there at half-past four."

She paused, but before Dick could reply, she continued excitedly. "I know! Why not come with me? You could call for me here in a taxi soon after four. You needn't get out, I'll be on the watch. Aunt Edith will be out, she's going to one of her meetings. We'll go to the Magnificent, and greet the parent. He'll be delighted; he's heard a lot about you, and, besides, you'll be some one fresh for him to talk to. Say you will, there's a dear."

Dick hesitated. He had not confessed, even to himself, that his real reason for coming to life again had been to see Alison. Why should he not fall in with her suggestion? It was most unlikely that any-

body in his circle would be at the Magnificent at such an hour. Anyhow, the risk was worth it.

"Right, I'll be there," he replied.

He employed the time until four o'clock looking through the correspondence which had accumulated in his absence, and then called a taxi and drove to Alison's address. The car had scarcely come to rest before the door when Alison appeared and entered it. She looked at him smilingly. "Well, how's the mystery progressing?" she asked.

Dick frowned. There was so great a gulf between his experiences of the last two evenings and this girl he loved that it seemed impossible that they should exist in the same world. "Oh, I think I've made a pretty fair start," he replied indifferently.

"That means that you aren't going to tell me anything," said Alison, laughing.

"Well, there's nothing much to tell, yet," he replied. "I've made a start, that's all."

She glanced at him quickly. "Something's happened!" she exclaimed. "I could tell that, the moment I saw you. You needn't be frightened, I'm not going to ask you what it is." Her voice changed suddenly. "You're not doing anything—dangerous, are you, Dick?"

"Dangerous? Oh, dear no!" replied Dick hastily. In spite of his tone of assurance, he could not rid himself of the memory of that demoniacal laughter, and of the thought of Inspector Brooks's body lying rigid in the packing-case. His laughter must have retained a trace of grimness, for she continued, obviously unconvinced.

"Do be careful, Dick," she said, laying her hand

on his knee. "You're a determined person, I know, and you would go through with anything to the bitter end. But you might remember the anxiety you cause to your—friends."

The arrival at the taxi at the entrance of the Hotel Magnificent prevented his reply. They entered its splendour together, and Dick made inquiries at the reception office.

"Dr. Weatherleigh? Yes, he arrived a few minutes ago. Would you like to go up and see him?"

Dick replied in the affirmative, and he and Alison were led to a suite on the first floor. A voice bade them enter, and Dick found himself for the first time in the presence of the distinguished antiquary.

Alison's father cut rather an incongruous figure in the sumptuous setting of the Hotel Magnificent. He was tall and gaunt, with stooping shoulders and an untidy shock of greyish hair. He was dressed in a rough tweed suit, which showed signs of considerable wear, and his heavy boots were badly down at heel. His clean-shaven face was that of a dreamer but it wore a kindly smile, and his long fingers were those of an artist.

He kissed his daughter affectionately, and kept his arm round her while she introduced Dick.

"I am very glad to meet you, Mr. Penhampton," he said warmly. "Alison has mentioned you more than once in her letters. I hope you will give me the pleasure of staying and having tea with us?"

"Of course he will," replied Alison, disengaging herself. "That's what I brought him here for. Now, listen, father dear. You can't possibly roam about London like that! Haven't you got anything decent to wear?"

"I believe that there are some other clothes packed in my trunk," replied Dr. Weatherleigh.

"Well, I'm going to look," said Alison. "You order tea, and I'll see what you've brought with you. I shall probably have to spend the rest of the evening buying you Christian collars, or something."

She ran out of the room, and her father turned to Dick. "I suppose Alison's right," he said, with an apologetic smile. "Somehow I never seem to have time to think of my personal appearance. That's the worst of a hobby, it's apt to usurp an undue share of one's mind. Even though one is interested in the Ancient Britons, one is hardly justified in dressing like them."

He spoke shyly, as if deferring to Dick's own elegance, but there was a twinkle in his eyes that belied the seeming humility.

Tea was a pleasant meal. Alison and Dick did most of the talking, while Dr. Weatherleigh listened, occasionally throwing in a mild comment. Dick found that he was not so wrapped up in his hobby as to be entirely ignorant of current events and was therefore not surprised at a reference to the theft of the necklace.

"I believe that Alison told me that you are Lord Hardway's brother-in-law, Mr. Penhampton," he said, in a pause in the conversation. "I read in the newspapers of the loss of the family diamonds. Have the police found any clue yet?"

"Oh, father dear, you mustn't mention the Hardway diamonds!" exclaimed Alison, with mock solemnity. "Dick can think of nothing else, but he insists upon maintaining the most solemn silence on the subject."

"Then no doubt he is in the confidence of the police," replied Dr. Weatherleigh. "I will certainly refrain from asking indiscreet questions."

"I can hardly claim to be in the confidence of the police," said Dick with a smile. "But I confess that it would give me great satisfaction to find the man who's got the diamonds."

"Diamonds," said Dr. Weatherleigh reflectively. "Now the stones I'm interested in would never attract a burglar. Really, I cannot see the use of diamonds——"

"Some people," said Dick, reaching for his hat, "have a fancy for setting them in rings."

And Alison, after he left, devoutly hoped her father would not notice the warm colour flooding her face.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AT HIS rooms, Dick re-assumed the character of Captain Blackwood, and returned unobtrusively to Mellin Street. No message had come for him in his absence, and Jerry was sure that no one was even aware that he had left the house. He served up a most admirable supper, after which Dick settled himself before the fire.

His interview with Inspector Pollard had to some extent re-assured him. The last thing he desired was to come into conflict with the police, or for them to discover that he was engaged in an independent investigation. This would lead to all sorts of complications, and probably to a friendly watch being kept upon his movements. If he were to gain the confidence of the gang of which the unknown man was the leader, he must on no account risk anything of the kind. And it was apparent, from the rather elementary inquiries made by Pollard, that the police had not advanced in the direction which he had taken.

The laughter of the unknown man still rang in his ears, producing a chill feeling of uneasiness. But in spite of this, Dick told himself that he ran no earthly risk. At the first threat of danger, he had only to tell Sir Edric the whole story, and the unknown man and his gang would be swiftly and securely rounded up. Certainly, such a tame ending to his adventure was to be avoided, but the possibility of it eliminated every trace of peril.

Even Dick's unfailing cheerfulness was scarcely proof against the tedium of the following day. He did not dare repeat his excursion into his natural haunts, fearing that too frequent an appearance was bound to lead to his detection. It rained heavily, and he and Jerry kept one another company round the fire, yarning about their adventures during the war. And then at last, when Dick had almost abandoned hope of ever hearing from the unknown man again, the message came.

It came in rather a curious way. Dick started up as he heard a knock on the house door. He had reached that state of restlessness when it was almost impossible for him to sit still. He opened the door, admitting a gust of wind and rain that caused the feeble gas-jet to flicker despairingly. A hand thrust a screwed-up ball of paper towards him, and a childish voice muttered: "For Captain Blackwood." Then the messenger vanished.

Dick shut the door, without any attempt to discover the identity of the messenger. He did not wish to appear inquisitive; his rôle was that of the man who is prepared to accept orders and obey them without question. He walked back to the kitchen, where he very carefully unrolled the wet ball of paper. It proved to be an outline map, bearing the heading: "London Midland & Scottish Railway; London, Tilbury and Southend section." It must have been torn out of a time-table.

Dick spread the map out on the table, and examined it closely. It bore very little detail, beyond the line of the railway and the names of the stations. But at one point, south of Rainham station, and on the

bank of the river, a cross had been made in pencil, and by this was written: "11.30 P.M."

"Well, that's clear enough!" muttered Dick. "I've got to be at that point at half-past eleven to-night. It sounds interesting, but I wonder what the devil I shall be expected to do when I get there? It's a pretty lonely spot, if I remember right."

Certainly, when he left Rainham station just before eleven, the prospect did not appear encouraging. It was Saturday, and the various factories scattered along the Essex shore of the river displayed no signs of activity. Very few people were about, and the rain was still falling in torrents, driven before a biting wind. Dick, muffling up as best he could in his threadbare overcoat, walked out of the station into the cheerless night.

He had a rough idea of the lie of the land, and he took a road which led across the marshes towards the river. The road rapidly deteriorated, until it became a mere cart-track, along which a muddy stream poured sluggishly, two or three inches deep. It wound and twisted, skirting the marsh, and separated from it by deep ditches on either side. At every few yards Dick was compelled to use the torch which he had brought with him, in order to avoid plunging waist-deep into a horrible compound of mud and slimy green weed. And then, all at once, the road took a turn round a narrow belt of trees, which shut out the lights of Rainham behind.

Dick paused, and looked around him. The down-pour had, for the moment, abated, and given place to a thin chill drizzle. In front of him a light appeared and disappeared with steady persistence. This

he guessed to be the beacon on Coldharbour Point, and he welcomed this as showing him that he was, at least, heading in the right direction. Beyond this he could see the dim red light of a barge making her way down the river, and, beyond this again, seen mistily through the drizzle, the scattered lights of a town on the Kentish shore.

All round him the marshes lay, sodden and desolate, and across them swept a horrible, sulphureous stench, the very breath of hell. It seemed to him that he had stepped into the nether world, a world bounded on one side by a range of low hills, from the centre of which came an unearthly, flickering glow. It was a long time before he recognised these hills for what they were, the mountains of London's rubbish, piled here to smoulder and defile the marshes with their fetid odour of corruption. The illusion of hell was complete, a hell wherein a lost soul might wander, hedged about with mire, led on by beckoning will-o'-the-wisps, breathing the smoke of the underworld. With a shudder he set out again, following the almost obliterated track.

It seemed to him an age before he reached the end of it, an age of stumbling, of wading ankle-deep in muddy water. Then at last he reached the shore of the river, and saw in front of him the vague outline of a disused wharf, fallen into hopeless ruin. The planking had fallen away, the piles which had once supported it stood up gaunt and bare, like some menacing skeleton. The last of the ebb tide was running out, swishing black and sinister round the outermost piles. Between the water and the shore on which he stood was a wide belt of mud, soft and glistening,

its smooth deceptive surface shining like a mirror under the rays of his torch.

Was this the rendezvous? There seemed to be no human being within miles; the river bank was utterly lonely, deserted, accursed. Dick stood still and listened. Not a sound came to his ears, all was still and desolate. A horror of great loneliness seized him, and it required all his power of will to restrain himself from rushing madly back along the road he had come, back to light and life, away from this dead water, and worse than dead marsh. For a moment he stood, trembling in every limb, until his courage conquered the horror that had enfolded him.

A high sea-wall protected the marshes from the encroachment of the river, built of earth thrown up from the deep ditches, and covered with coarse rough grass. Up this Dick scrambled, in an attempt to discover his exact whereabouts. The wharf could not be the rendezvous; it was long after half-past eleven, and there was no sign of those who had summoned him. Yet he was certain, if only from the position of the beacon, which still flashed its intermittent light over the unheeding river, that he was within a very short distance of the spot indicated by the cross on the map. And then, not far away, just inside the sea-wall, he saw a dark shadow looming through the murk. The light of the beacon showed it up fitfully. It was a ruined house.

This must be the place, and, after a moment's hesitation, Dick set off along the wall towards it. As he drew nearer, he could see that it had once been a four-roomed cottage, built probably for the accommodation of the wharf keeper. But it had long fallen

into disuse. The glass had disappeared from the windows, the roof showed ugly gaps where the slates had slipped and fallen. At last Dick stood looking down upon it. But not a gleam of light greeted him, not a sound disturbed the grave-like silence of the marshes.

Dick clambered down the sloping side of the seawall, and walked round the house to the gap where the front door had been. With a shudder of distaste he entered. It was utterly dark within; a darkness charged with the heavy stench of the gases from the refuse heaps, which seemed to have collected here through the ages. A furtive scuttling sounded all round him, and he wondered vaguely what even rats could find to live on in this barren spot. And at regular intervals the beams of the beacon shone through the yawning window frame, casting a faint, ghostly radiance on slimy floor and reeking walls.

He took out his torch and threw its rays rapidly round the room. It was bare, empty, stripped of everything that turns a mass of bricks and mortar into a home. But there was a doorway leading into a second room, and through this Dick passed. He fancied that his torch was nearly exhausted; he had called upon it too frequently during his journey from Rainham station. The dim light of the beacon was enough to guide him through the doorway, and to show him at intervals the faint outline of this second room. It, too, was empty, save for something, ill-defined in the intermittent glow, standing in the centre of the floor. But, as the light of the beacon showed for a second or two before expiring into complete blackness, it fell upon a point, which reflected the beam like an eye of fire.

Dick stepped cautiously towards the object, his

hand outstretched before him. His groping fingers felt the outlines of a table, then, moving upwards, encountered something which made him leap backwards with a half-suppressed cry of terror. In trembling haste he fumbled for his torch once more, and threw its rays upon the table. Upon it lay, rigid with the horror of violent death, the body of a man, and on his breast, sparkling with lurid beauty, was a diamond, which Dick recognised as having been torn from the Hardway necklace.

CHAPTER TWELVE

DICK stood rooted to the spot with horror. His whole soul clamoured for flight, to escape from this terrible place, from that awful stretched-out form, with the diamond gleaming upon it like some malignant talisman. But his muscles refused to act, he was unable to do more than stand there, trembling violently, the light of the torch, held in his shaking hand, causing strange shadows to play across the ghastly face, until it seemed to mock his terror.

The utter silence fell upon him like a pall, till his ears rang with a thousand imagined voices. He fancied that he heard whispering all about him, hoarse threatening whispers as of hidden men creeping towards him stealthily. And then, above the whispers, he imagined the echo of a laugh, a cruel scarce-human laugh, running up and down the scale with a menace which seemed to freeze his blood.

How long he stood there he could not tell. At last with a sudden shuddering gasp, a rude awakening into consciousness, he stretched out his hand and grasped the diamond. Then, with faltering steps, he groped his way out of the house and clambered once more on to the summit of the sea-wall.

After the horror from which he had escaped, even the dismal, sulphur-laden atmosphere of the marshes seemed to him fresh and invigorating. A vessel was coming slowly up the river, and he gazed eagerly at her lights. They seemed to him the emblem of clean

healthy life, an evidence that he was again in a world of honest human endeavour. Even the melancholy beacon, casting its pallid rays over the black water, seemed to him a symbol of hope.

He made his way back along the rain-sodden road, forcing his mind from the contemplation of the ruined house and its awful occupant. He must decide upon his course of action, and that at once. The day when he had so lightly embarked upon his mission seemed far away. He had been brought face to face with tragedy, a stern reminder that he could no longer play the half-scornful rôle which he had assumed.

Rainham station was dark and deserted; the last train had passed through, and, unless he waited for many hours, there was no prospect of reaching London by the railway. But he could not face the prospect of waiting. He was in a fever of excitement, and he felt that whatever was to be done, must be done at once. For a moment he thought of finding the nearest policeman, and informing him of his discovery. But he reflected that this would lead to further delay, possibly to his own detention. No, there was only one man to whom he could unfold the whole story—Sir Edric Conway.

Resolutely he set out to walk to Barking, six miles perhaps on the road to London. He calculated that he would arrive there about three o'clock in the morning, and though it was unlikely that trains would be running at that hour, there was at least the possibility of finding some vehicle in which to complete his journey. And as he walked, his mind became clearer, and he was able to consider the significance of his experience.

The first and most obvious fact which struck him

was that he had been given a terrible warning. There was very little doubt that he had been sent to the lonely house in order that he might see for himself the fate that overtook those who opposed the wishes of the unknown man. He could form no idea of whom the victim had been, in this instance. The man's features, distorted in death, had been utterly strange to him. He retained the vision of a slight, athletic-looking form, dressed in the garments of an East-end worker. The man's clothes had been sodden with water, streams of which had trickled down the legs of the table on to the floor. This might have been accounted for by long exposure to the rain. But from the appearance of the man's face, Dick imagined that he had met his end by drowning.

Dick shuddered as he pictured the scene. Some recalcitrant member of the gang, no doubt, lured to that lonely spot as he himself had been. And then a sudden attack, a brief struggle, and then the wretched man, gagged and bound, no doubt, flung into the black water that eddied beneath the rotten piles of the abandoned wharf. A few minutes of silence, broken only perhaps by a strangling gasp, and then the recovery of the body, that it might serve as an awful warning. Dick's imagination drew for him a vivid picture of it lying in that lonely room, and with a cold thrill of horror he remembered the scuffling of the rats——

This would never do. He must pull himself together and concentrate upon some less fearful aspect of the matter, if he wished to retain his reason. The diamond! Why had that been left there, to glitter evilly upon the dead man's breast? It could not be sheer coincidence that one of the Hardway diamonds, the object of his quest, had fallen in his way in this

dramatic manner. It had been placed there to emphasise the warning, to show him that the search for the remainder of the necklace could have only one end, so far as he was concerned.

With a shock he realised that, if this were the case, two other facts were indicated. The first was that the unknown man, with whom he had almost by accident got into touch, if not actually the present possessor of the necklace, had at least the disposal of it. This was scarcely helpful, since he had not the slightest clue to the unknown man's identity, and was pretty certain that a search of the house in Creek Street would fail to reveal any traces of him. The second fact was far more disturbing. Whoever placed the diamond for him to find must have known of his own connection with the necklace.

Dick felt a sudden wave of shame at the realisation. His puerile attempts at amateur detection had been as transparent as glass to the brain which directed the gang. His assumption of the disguise of Captain Blackwood, his futile lurking in the unsavoury heart of Walworth, had been to his adversary as an open book. His identity was known, his motives were patently revealed. But why had he been afforded this grim warning? How was it that some other victim, rather than himself, lay on the table in that sinister house? Here was yet another mystery.

His adversary had won the first round; of that there could be no question. Yet, while still under the horror of his recent experience, Dick was not intimidated. He had picked up the wrong weapons, that was all. It remained to discard them and to choose others, for he had no intention of abandoning the struggle. But he must first see Sir Edric.

At Barking he was lucky enough to fall in with a lorry driver, who gave him a lift as far as Mile End. From there he walked through the City and along the Embankment to Whitehall, wondering how he should approach his friend. No time was to be lost, he knew well enough. He had no wish to walk into Scotland Yard and blurt out his story. For one thing, he had nothing on him by which to prove his identity, and he was under no delusions as to the curious figure he cut.

At last he decided to enter a telephone call box and ring up Sir Edric at his flat. Fortunately, he was a widower, and lived alone. Besides, Dick reflected that an Assistant Commissioner of Police must be accustomed to be rung up at all hours, even before dawn on Sunday morning. He put his idea into practice, and was rewarded by the sound of Sir Edric's brisk and alert voice. "Dick Penhampton?" he replied, without a trace of surprise. "Yes, come along at once. I'll let you in. No, don't apologise. I'm used to turning out at any time."

In a few minutes Dick had reached the flat in Whitehall Court. Sir Edric admitted him, and could not restrain an exclamation of astonishment at his appearance. But he asked no questions, and merely led Dick into the dining-room, where he lighted the fire and poured out a stiff measure of brandy. "Here you are, drink this and take off your wet clothes," he said. "I'll lend you a dressing-gown, and you can slip it on while I make a cup of tea. You'd rather I didn't disturb the household."

He disappeared, to return in a few minutes bearing a steaming pot of tea. "I can't work in the morning till I've had my tea," he said cheerfully. "And, by

the look of you, you won't be any the worse for something warm. Now then, if you're ready, let's have the yarn."

Dick hesitated. In this comfortable room, in the presence of his matter-of-fact friend, it seemed as if the night's experiences had been some horrible nightmare. As much to reassure himself as anything else, he put his hand in his pocket and produced the diamond, which he laid on the table. It sparkled in the blaze of the electric light, splendid and iridescent.

Sir Edric glanced at it, and then looked intently at Dick. "Well?" he asked.

"That is one of the smaller and less valuable stones from the Hardway necklace," replied Dick.

Sir Edric picked it up and examined it with interest. "There is no doubt of that, I suppose?" he inquired.

"None whatever," replied Dick positively. "In an amateur sort of way, I am a bit of an expert in stones, and I knew the necklace well."

"Where did you find it?" asked Sir Edric.

"Lying on the body of a dead man," replied Dick. "Listen, and I'll tell you the whole story."

He was as good as his word, and gave a careful account of his doings from the time of his first visit to the Margate Jetty to his discovery of the body on the table. Sir Edric listened attentively, putting in a question here and there, and making notes of names and places on a sheet of paper. He sat for some moments in silence, after Dick had finished, and then laughed shortly.

"I ought, I suppose, to read you a lecture on usurping the functions of the police," he said. "You know, Dick, the amateur detective is usually an infernal nuisance, and always ends by giving us more trouble

than he's worth. But, in this case, I won't deny that you've been useful. Ever since I saw poor Brooks's body in that packing-case, I have suspected the agency at the bottom of it all, and you've confirmed my suspicions. You have been in the presence of a man who is the greatest criminal mystery of modern times."

"The man I met in Creek Street, Wapping?" inquired Dick eagerly.

Sir Edric nodded. "That is the man," he replied gravely. "None of us have ever seen him, to our knowledge. But, for the last ten years or so, whenever there has been a mystery which we could not solve, a crime of which we could not detect the perpetrator, we have come across traces of him in the course of our investigations. We knew nothing of him for a long time, we believe that he was not an individual, but merely a sign adopted by the members of one of the criminal gangs. We possess nothing by which to identify him, no finger-prints, no foot-marks, no tangible evidence of his existence. So far he has completely eluded us."

"But how do you know of him, then?" asked Dick.

"By a word dropped here and there," replied Sir Edric. "We know that a directing mind exists, which engineers the details of many curious crimes. So much we have extorted from the tools who have fallen into our hands. But never have we succeeded in persuading any of these tools to give us the slightest clue as to his identity. He has established a regular reign of terror among the criminal classes, any member of which would rather undergo the utmost penalty of the law than inform against him. Personally, I believe that they know very little more about him than we do

ourselves. The only characteristic that has ever been described to us is his laugh."

Dick shuddered. "Ugh, I can hear it still!" he exclaimed. "What is the man's name?"

"His real name?" replied Sir Edric. "That I would give a good deal to know. The underworld has christened him from his laugh, and we have adopted the nickname."

"And that is?" suggested Dick.

"The Funny Toff," replied Sir Edric gravely.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

INSPECTOR POLLARD was struggling with a theory. Struggling was, in fact, the only word which adequately expressed his frame of mind. On the one hand, the theory was so ridiculous that no sane man could be expected to accept it. On the other hand, the few facts which he was able to discover tended to confirm it.

Pollard was a thoroughly domesticated man. He had a wife and two children, and was the owner of a very nice little house in Clapham. His hours off duty he spent in the bosom of his family, slippers on his feet, pipe in his mouth, and the latest detective story in his hand. He loved detective stories. Having little or no imagination himself, he had a supreme contempt for that attribute as an aid to detective work. The charm of the crime novel was, to him, in the wide gulf it displayed between fact and fiction.

From the first, he had been secretly disgusted at being put in charge of the Hardway Case. Had the matter began and ended with the disappearance of the necklace, he would not have minded. But the murder of his friend Brooks had enormously complicated matters. Brooks had been murdered as the result of incautious inquiry into the burglary. Surely to take on his job was the business of an unmarried man, of which there were plenty in the Force. It would be highly unpleasant for his family if he were to share Brooks's fate.

Not that Pollard was in any sense a coward. He was merely cautious. If it became necessary, he would risk his life as fearlessly as any of his colleagues. But he had resolved that, if he could help it, it would not become necessary. His plan was not to enter into a personal duel with his adversary, but to draw the net tighter and tighter round him until he could be landed without risk.

Pollard, though lacking in imagination, was a methodical and experienced detective. He knew, for instance, from the nature of the crime, the type of criminal who had committed it. At first sight, the theft of the Hardway diamonds had seemed to be the work of the specialised and scientific burglar, such as Pussy Herridge. If this were the case, the problem of their recovery was only a matter of routine. A careful combing of the various receivers of stolen property would almost certainly result in the recovery of at least some of the stones. Pollard knew well enough that the necklace would have to be disposed of piecemeal, and not as a whole.

But the murder of Brooks had changed the whole aspect of the matter. No ordinary burglar, or receiver, would go to the lengths of murdering a police officer. For the matter of that, Brooks would not have fallen a victim to anybody of that calibre. The manner of his death, and, more particularly, the insolent addressing of his body to the Assistant Commissioner, proved that the murder was the work of some superior and powerful mind. And, in Pollard's experience, only one such criminal mind existed: the Funny Toff.

He resolved that his procedure must be to discover the identity of this mysterious individual, of whom he

knew nothing beyond mere fleeting whispers. He was not deterred by the fact that almost every officer in the Yard had made the same resolve. It was perfectly clear to him that Brooks had come to the same conclusions, that he had determined to attack the Funny Toff single-handed, and had been murdered for his pains. Pollard had no intention of following his example.

Brooks, before his departure for Wapping on the evening following the theft of the necklace, had told him of the curious adventure of Pussy Herridge, and of his suspicions that he was the burglar. Pollard had interviewed that worthy, before his release from gaol, and had had a heart-to-heart talk with him. He had a curiously insinuating manner, and found no great difficulty in persuading Pussy to unburden his mind.

"Look here, Pussy, it is no good beating about the bush," he had said. "We know all about you, and we know perfectly well that you pinched the necklace. I'm talking to you as a friend, and, if you're straight with me, I can promise you that anything you tell me won't go beyond us two. Who was it took the necklace from you?"

Pussy winked at him slyly. "What's the game, guv'nor?" he replied. "Is this a trap, or has some of your chaps run off the deep end?"

"It's no trap, Pussy," Pollard assured him. "We have our suspicions, of course, and it wouldn't do you any harm if you were to confirm them."

"So that's it, is it," said Pussy, with an air of satisfaction. "Nice thing, isn't it, when the police turns into rogues themselves. You ain't found them two plain-clothes chaps yet, then?"

An inkling of the truth flashed across Pollard's

mind. "No, Pussy, we haven't, and that's a fact," he replied. "We want your help, that's what I came here for. If you can tell us anything helpful, I'll soon have you out of this."

"You've nothing against me, as it is," returned Pussy quickly. "Still, seeing as it's your own chaps as have got the stuff, there's no harm in me spinning the yarn. It's like this, Mr. Pollard. I was just taking a walk through Woodbridge Square that night, when I sees something a-lying on the pavement. I picks it up, and bless me if it ain't a case, with a lot of sparklers in it. Well, I thinks to myself, somebody's dropped this little lot. Best thing I can do is to take it round to the station."

"Very honest of you, Pussy," put in Pollard ironically.

"I was on my way to Vine Street," continued Pussy, disregarding the interruption, "when one of your plain-clothes chaps comes after me, and, afore I could say a word, claps the bracelets on me. I knew it wasn't any good saying nothing, you chaps are too suspicious to listen to a fellow. The man takes the sparklers from me, and puts me in one of them grey police cars he had waiting. Well, I thinks, these chaps won't listen to the truth, they'll make it out a fair cop. So I bides my time and when the chap wasn't looking, I slips out of the car and 'ops it."

"Didn't they come after you?" asked Pollard.

"Shouldn't wonder," replied Pussy. "Anyhow, I heard the chap what put the bracelets on me holler out. But I gives 'em the slip in the fog, and that's the last I see of them. If they didn't take the sparklers to the Yard, they must have gone off with them themselves, see?"

Pollard had returned from his interview with Pussy in a very thoughtful frame of mind. He had the impression that Pussy had been speaking the truth, at least as far as his "arrest" was concerned. That he had been duped was perfectly obvious. Pollard had subsequently established the fact that no plain-clothes men had been operating with a car in the West-End that night. Some criminal gang had learnt that Pussy meant to make an attempt on the Hardway diamonds that night, had lain in wait for him in the guise of police officers, and had relieved him of his loot. So much was apparent.

He knew the criminal mind well enough to be sure of the uselessness of questioning Pussy as to his confidants. Pussy had only spoken of his "arrest" because he believed that members of the police had been involved. He would refuse to give any information about his associates. Since then, Pollard had given orders that Pussy was to be watched, with a view to discovering who was likely to have known in advance of the intended burglary.

Somehow the trick which had been played on Pussy suggested the Funny Toff. This elusive person had got possession of the necklace. Brooks, by some means, had learnt this, and had found a clue which had set him on his track. And, almost by accident, Pollard himself had unearthed an amazing fact, so amazing that for the moment he had decided to keep it to himself. He believed that he had discovered the identity of the Funny Toff.

On the Sunday morning of Dick's visit to Sir Edric, he could not sleep. The theory which he had founded upon this identity was so baffling that it would allow his brain no rest. Consequently, when the telephone

rang, and a message came for him that the Assistant Commissioner would like to see him in his office as soon as possible, he answered the call with considerable alacrity.

He betrayed no astonishment when he found Dick in the Assistant Commissioner's room, but greeted him sedately. "Hullo!" exclaimed Sir Edric. "Have you two met before?"

"I had the pleasure of calling upon Mr. Penhampton the day before yesterday, sir," replied Pollard quickly. "He was good enough to give me certain particulars of the Hardway necklace."

"Well, he has rather a curious story to tell us," replied Sir Edric. "We needn't go into the details now. The urgent point is that he has found a dead man on the Essex marshes, not far from Rainham station. I have already had the local police informed, and have asked them to put a guard over the body until we have had time to see it. The curious thing is that, with the body, was one of the diamonds from the missing necklace. Here it is."

Sir Edric laid the diamond on his desk, and Pollard's eyes flashed as he glanced at it. How did this remarkable discovery fit in with his theory? How did this Mr. Penhampton, the man who had reported the loss of the necklace, the friend of his chief, happen to stumble on this body in such a remote spot? But it was not his business to ask questions at this moment.

"You would like me to inspect the body, sir?" he asked impassively.

"I should," replied Sir Edric. "I've rung up the police surgeon, and he will be here in a few minutes. You had better take a car and take him with you. Mr. Penhampton will show you the way."

"Very good, sir, I'll make arrangements at once," said Pollard, leaving the room.

Sir Edric smiled. "I shouldn't tell Pollard anything about your adventures, if I were you, Dick," he said. "If he knows you've been playing the amateur sleuth, it'll probably antagonise him. I'll break it gently when he comes back to report. I'm sorry to have to send you off again like this, but we can't leave that body hanging about all day."

"Oh, that's all right!" exclaimed Dick cheerfully. "It's part of my penance, I suppose."

The drive down to Rainham took place in silence. Pollard appeared to be disposed to ask no questions until he had seen what was to be seen for himself. The party left the car at the police station, and proceeded across the marshes on foot, Dick acting as guide. In the grey light of the morning the place lost nothing of its desolation. A clinging mist enshrouded everything, intensifying the impression of loneliness.

They made their way to the ruined house, over which a stolid constable was mounting guard. "Nothing been touched, I hope?" asked Pollard, as the man saluted.

"No, sir, I've done no more than glance inside," replied the constable.

Dick led the way in, closely followed by Pollard and the doctor. The body lay as he had last seen it, prone on the table, even more horrible in the subdued daylight. Pollard walked up to it, and looked intently at the distorted face.

"Pussy Herridge, by all that's holy!" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ALISON contrived to see a good deal of her father during his stay at the Hotel Magnificent. They were genuinely attached to one another, and any time they spent together was enjoyed by both. Indeed, Alison only paid these long visits to her aunt at her father's especial wish.

"I'm a dull old stick, my dear," he had said to her once. "It isn't good for a girl of your age to spend her time in the depths of the country, with only an old fossil as her companion. You'll be getting romantic, and running away with the postman, or something."

"I shan't do anything of the kind!" interrupted Alison indignantly. "Fancy having to live with a man who has to get up at five in the morning!"

"I speak metaphorically, my dear," continued Dr. Weatherleigh patiently. "No doubt there are other males in the neighbourhood of Lestridge Hall whose duties do not involve such uncomfortably early rising. The point is, my dear, that you would be far better employed amusing yourself in London."

Since money was no object to her, Alison found, after a while, that amusement in London was not difficult to obtain. But it was only after she had made the acquaintance of Dick Penhampton that she altogether ceased to regret the life at Lestridge Hall. She was still glad to return there at intervals, but London had become for her the centre of attraction. This change

in her attitude may have caused her some scruples of conscience; she had at times a secret dread that in her prolonged visits to her aunt she might be thought to be neglecting her father. This it was that led her to visit the Magnificent every afternoon of her father's stay in London.

The afternoon was the only time which he could spare for her. As Dr. Weatherleigh often explained to her, he hated London, and only came up from Lestridge Hall when the pursuit of his hobby made it absolutely necessary. Consequently, he was in the habit of crowding everything that he had to do into the shortest possible time, in order the sooner to be able to return to the country again.

"I shall be a very busy man, for the next few days," he said at the first meeting with his daughter, on the day of his arrival. "My mornings will be spent in visiting the museums, and I have no doubt that I shall be obliged to lunch with several of the curators. In the evening, I have appointments to dine with various of my fellow-students, or with one or other of the so-called learned societies. That means that only my afternoons will be free, and then, my dear, if your social duties will allow you to come to tea with your old father, I shall be more than pleased to see you."

"Of course I'll come, every afternoon, if you'll let me," Alison replied. And she kept her word.

But it was not until the Tuesday following the death of Pussy Herridge that she made any further mention of Dick. And then, suddenly, when she and her father had finished tea, she referred to him abruptly. "I've asked Dick Penhampton to call for me here this evening," she announced. "We're having dinner together."

"Dick Penhampton?" repeated her father. "Well, I admire your taste. From what I saw of him the other day I should imagine that he would be an excellent partner for a *tête-à-tête*. You two see a good deal of one another, don't you?"

"Oh, a fair amount," replied Alison casually. "He and I get on very well."

Dr. Weatherleigh chuckled. "I believe that he has usurped the place in your heart that I once feared would be occupied by the postman," he said quietly.

"Father dear! I'm surprised at you!" exclaimed Alison. "How can you be so hopelessly Victorian? Why, you'll insinuate next that I'm walking out with him, or some such obsolete expression. Even you ought to know that one can be seen out with a man nowadays without being suspected of caring for him."

"Methinks she doth protest too much," remarked her father slyly. "Why shouldn't you have fallen in love with him? He's a very decent young fellow, from all I can see."

"Oh, well, if you will have it, I do care for him," replied Alison defiantly, with flaming cheeks. "It's unfashionable, I know, and all that, and all my set would think I was mad if they knew that I'd admitted I really cared for anybody. And, what's more, I think he cares for me, in a way."

"You'll never persuade me that love will ever go out of fashion," said Dr. Weatherleigh gently. "Well, my dear, I'm very glad to hear of it, and if matters come to a head, you are assured of my blessing beforehand."

Alison jumped up from her chair, and kissed her father impulsively. "You're a darling," she whispered. And then, as a knock sounded at the door, she re-

gained her seat, assuming an air of the utmost tranquillity.

Dick Penhampton was shown in, and greeted Dr. Weatherleigh with considerable deference. He was anxious for a conversation with Alison's father, and had eagerly accepted her suggestion that he should call for her at the Magnificent. But, now that he had arrived, he sat tongue-tied, seeking in vain for some topic with which to begin.

Dr. Weatherleigh solved his difficulty for him. "I happened to see your name in the paper to-day, Mr. Penhampton," he said conversationally. "You appear to have performed a most unpleasant duty with considerable credit to yourself."

Dick grinned foolishly. He had read the report of the inquest on Pussy Herridge in the papers, but he had hoped that it had not yet come to the ears of the old antiquary. Not that very much had been said about his own exploits. He had merely given evidence of the finding of the body, and reporting it to the police. The coroner had sat without a jury, and had been coached by Sir Edric, who had hinted that it was not in the interests of justice that any questions should be asked as to Dick's business on the marshes at that hour of the night. The reports had merely recorded the bare fact that a Mr. Richard Penhampton had found the body in the ruined house.

"Why, Dick, what have you been up to?" inquired Alison, a shade of anxiety in her voice.

"Mr. Penhampton was compelled to give evidence at an inquest, my dear," replied her father. "Merely a formal matter. He happened to be the first to find the body. An unpleasant experience, and one that is better not discussed. I hear that you and my daughter

are dining together, Mr. Penhampton. I trust that your evening will prove more amusing than mine. I have an engagement to attend a meeting of the Royal Neolithic Society."

The conversation took a more general turn, and after a while Alison left the two men together, on the plea that she wished to explore the condition of her father's wardrobe. She had not left the room many moments before Dick made up his mind to the plunge. "Look here, sir!" he exclaimed abruptly. "I want to marry Alison."

He seemed to expect that Dr. Weatherleigh would be completely taken aback by this astounding declaration. If this was the case, he was destined to disappointment, for the antiquary merely smiled at him, as he would have smiled at some new discovery, which he found true to type. "May I say that I have long expected something of the kind?" he replied.

Dick heaved a sigh of relief. This was not the sort of parent who was likely to throw difficulties in the way. "Then you approve, sir?" he asked diffidently.

"Yes, I approve," replied Dr. Weatherleigh. "I approve because I happen to know Alison's feeling in the matter. Let me tell you that, compared with my daughter's happiness, the ordinary material considerations have no weight with me. She may marry whom she pleases, so long as she can convince me that it is for her own happiness. Needless to say, I am extremely thankful that her choice has fallen upon a man of your character and position. I know nothing of your financial status, nor do I wish to know. I am thankful to say that I am in a position to provide my daughter with an income sufficient to any position she may wish to maintain."

"It's awfully good of you to take it so well, sir," said Dick in heartfelt relief.

Dr. Weatherleigh could not repress a smile of amusement.

"My dear boy," he said, "you speak as if you had just broken a severe bereavement to me."

Dick's constraint melted in a laugh.

"Well, it is a bereavement in a way," he pointed out. "I don't want it to be a long engagement—and——"

"I understand," said Dr. Weatherleigh quietly. "But I am used to being alone—I've been alone most of my life, you know."

Dick remembered what Alison had told him of the mother who had died when she was still a baby. He found himself feeling astonishingly young and raw.

The awkward silence was broken by the entry of Alison, who came rather nervously into the room and looked at them both. She then went swiftly over to her father and whispered something in his ear. Dr. Weatherleigh nodded and smiled. Impulsively, she threw her arms round him and kissed him. "You're an old darling!" she exclaimed. "Now then, Dick, if you expect me to dress for dinner, it's time you took me home."

Alison and Dick left the room together. Dr. Weatherleigh, left alone, smiled to himself. But the smile faded, and a look of great weariness overspread his face. He was losing Alison. And then the smile reappeared at the thought that, after all, he was losing her to Dick Penhampton.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

INSPECTOR POLLARD felt himself personally aggrieved by the death of Pussy Herridge. One of the links in the chain by which he hoped to establish the identity of the Funny Toff had been broken, and he could not help feeling that this had been, to some extent, the result of his own negligence. He ought to have kept a closer watch on Pussy's movements.

He admitted as much, in his conversation with the Assistant Commissioner, after the inquest. "I feel that I am to blame, sir," he said, knowing that a frank confession of error was the surest way of averting Sir Edric's reprimand. "If this man Herridge had been properly shadowed, he would be alive now. But you see how it was, sir. If my men had followed him too closely, he would have known that he was being watched, and would have made no attempt to get into touch with his friends. My instructions were merely to keep him under general observation."

"Well, Pollard, it's no use crying over spilt milk," replied Sir Edric. "The man's dead, and that's that. The only thing we can do now is to try and find out how he died. But I don't quite understand how he managed to escape from observation Saturday evening."

"I can tell you that, sir," said Pollard bitterly. "I think that Herridge knew that we were watching him, and he was pretty careful what he did. He stayed in his house most of the time—he did a bit of cobbling

when he had no other business on foot. When he wasn't there, he spent his time in the bar of the Margate Jetty. I had a man in both places, of course, and the landlord of the Margate Jetty is in with us, though I wouldn't like that to go any further, sir. I didn't know it myself, until he told me that he was a friend of Inspector Brooks."

Sir Edric nodded. "A very useful ally, I should imagine," he remarked.

"Very useful indeed, sir," replied Pollard. "Now, I'm pretty sure that neither in his own house nor at the Margate Jetty did Herridge hold any sort of a confidential conversation with anybody. At the Jetty, he would just have a drink or two with the regular customers, but nothing more. He was as cunning as a basket of monkeys, and he wouldn't say a word that was likely to give himself or his pals away.

"On Saturday he stayed at home until about four o'clock, and then he went out and walked down to the Jetty. Of course, sir, the place wasn't open, not officially, that is. But the house has a side door, opening upon a narrow passage that leads down to some steps. The landlord isn't above letting chaps in at the side door during closing hours, if he knows them and there's nobody about. The men in K Division wink at it, sir. It often comes in useful to know where a man is."

"Exactly," remarked Sir Edric with a smile. "Another piece of information I'm not supposed to know officially. Go on. Herridge, I gather, was let in by this side door soon after four o'clock?"

"Well, sir, that's just it," replied Pollard. "My man, seeing him go down the passage, took it for granted that he was going into the Jetty. Naturally,

he couldn't very well follow him, without giving away the fact that he was watching him. So he contented himself with waiting for him to come out again. He guessed that Herridge, once he had got in, would not come out again till the place closed at ten. But when ten o'clock came there was no Herridge, and when he made inquiries of the landlord, he found that he hadn't been inside the place that evening. Instead of reporting to me that he had lost touch with his man, he spent the rest of the night scouring round Wapping, trying to pick up the trail again."

"By ten o'clock, it would have been too late in any case," commented Sir Edric. "The medical evidence showed that Herridge was drowned between four and six. The natural inference was that Herridge did not intend to enter the public house when he went down the passage. Where else does it lead to?"

"Only the steps, sir," replied Pollard. "There isn't even another door leading on to it. The passage is about fifty yards long, and runs between the walls of a couple of warehouses. Sixty feet high, they are, I dare say."

"The steps lead into the river, I suppose," remarked Sir Edric. "Now, it was high water, we know, at about five on Saturday. There would therefore be a considerable depth of water at the steps at four."

"About seven feet, sir. I inquired on Sunday."

"Enough to drown a man in. We mustn't lose sight of the possibility that Herridge may have fallen in. Are the steps much used?"

"Very rarely, sir. A lot of barges and other small craft lie off them, but it isn't often that anybody lands at the steps themselves. It's easier to get ashore on one of the wharves on either side."

"Still, it is possible that if Herridge had a rendezvous, he could have been picked up at the steps," persisted Sir Edric. "It seems to me, Pollard, that, as you suspected, Herridge knew he was being watched, and determined to escape from this supervision. He may have arranged with a bargee or somebody—while he was in the bar of the Margate Jetty, probably—to pick him up at the steps and hide him for a bit. What's your idea, Pollard?"

"I think it was the other way round, sir," replied Pollard respectfully. "This is how I look at it. The men who took the diamonds from him after the burglary in Woodbridge Square probably had their eyes on him, and discovered that we were watching him. There was always the risk, from their point of view, that he might recognise them, and that we should overhear their conversation. They decided that it would be safest to shut his mouth for good, in the same way that they shut Brooks's mouth, sir."

"It would be easy enough to get one of their accomplices to offer to provide him with the means of escape. Herridge agreed to this and was picked up by a boat at the steps. He was then taken to the place where his body was found, and drowned there. They wouldn't risk drowning him off Wapping, sir. There are too many people about."

"That seems very probable," agreed Sir Edric. "They then left the diamond on his body, to serve as an additional defiance, as they addressed poor Brooks's body to me. I think that your theory is right, Pollard, though at present we can't possibly prove it. The point is, who is behind all this?"

"I don't think that there's much doubt about that, sir," replied Pollard slowly. "There's only one man

who would dare to cover his tracks with a couple of murders, and to take the trouble to make it clear that they were connected with the theft of the diamonds."

"Yes, I know whom you mean," replied Sir Edric. "I came to the same conclusion as soon as I heard of the death of this man Herridge. But how to identify him and bring it home to him, that's the point."

"I'm not going to rest until I've made one of these Wapping crooks admit something that will put me on his track, sir," said Pollard doggedly.

"Well, I wish you luck, Pollard," remarked Sir Edric. "You'll find it a pretty difficult task."

"I've got the beginnings of an idea already, sir," replied Pollard darkly. And then, as though afraid that he had said too much, he continued. "If you'll excuse me, sir, I have some instructions to give——"

He left the office, and Sir Edric leaned back in his chair, to wrestle with the problem in his own mind. He had an uncomfortable feeling that the Funny Toff was likely to prove more than a match for his staff. Brooks had been too impulsive; utterly contemptuous of danger, he had gone ahead on his own account and paid the penalty of his rashness. Pollard, a brilliant plodder, with no imagination beyond the ordinary routine of police procedure, was hardly the man to pit against an active and resourceful brain.

His meditations were interrupted by the buzzing of his private telephone. He took up the instrument and listened. "Yes, show him in," he replied.

Dick walked in, immaculately dressed, as was his usual custom. He greeted Sir Edric, and sat down in the chair which the latter pointed out to him. "Well, Conway, I've got a bit of news for you," he said. "I've got engaged, fixed it up yesterday."

"I needn't ask the lady's name," replied Sir Edric with a smile. "I congratulate you most heartily, my dear fellow. I know Alison well, of course, and her father's reputation is world wide. Is the announcement to be made in the name of Penhampton or of Blackwood, may I ask?"

Dick laughed merrily at the implied reproof.

"Oh, that nonsense is all over and done with!" he exclaimed. "I have a most uncomfortable feeling that I made a thundering ass of myself." Then in a more serious tone he continued: "I can't get it out of my head that but for my meddling that unfortunate chap Herridge would not have been murdered."

"I think Herridge would have disappeared in any case," replied Sir Edric gravely. "He was always a potential danger to the criminal and his gang. Nor do I regard your adventures as having been entirely wasted. After all, you are the only man we know who has actually interviewed the Funny Toff."

He paused, and then went on, speaking to himself as much as to Dick. "It's a devilish difficult thing that we're up against. Pollard hopes to get a clue to this man's identity through the tools which he works with. Personally, I think that method's hopeless. I don't believe that any of them know who he is. I fancy that he communicates with them in the same way that he communicated with you, in a dark room with a curtain between himself and the person with whom he wished to speak. His agents would obey him implicitly; for one thing I have no doubt that he paid them well, and, for another, they would be completely in his power. And I expect that he ran his own intelligence service."

"It must be fairly efficient, anyhow," remarked Dick. "I can't yet understand how he guessed that

the down-at-heel Captain Blackwood was in any way interested in the Hardway diamonds. Yet, if I was sent to that house as a warning to me, he must have guessed it. Why else was that particular diamond placed on Herridge's body?"

Sir Edric smiled. "It occurs to me that the identification of Captain Blackwood with Mr. Richard Penhampton was a fairly simple matter," he replied.

"Dashed if I can see that!" exclaimed Dick. "It was pitch dark in that room, except for the one flash I told you of, and I refuse to believe that he recognised me by that. How could my distinguished features be known to the Funny Toff? Again, I am certain that I was never followed between my rooms and Walworth."

"The significance of that flash seems to have been lost upon you," replied Sir Edric. "You don't suppose that a man like the Funny Toff would engage an unknown agent without taking steps to find out who he was, do you? I haven't a doubt that you were standing opposite a hidden camera, and that he took a flashlight photograph of you. That photograph was circulated among his agents, one of whom recognised you. You are a fairly well-known figure on race courses, at night-clubs, and places like that, you know, Dick."

"Good lord, I never thought of that!" exclaimed Dick, in some dismay.

"But I have," replied Sir Edric earnestly. "You're in this business now, Dick, whether you like it or not. And, since you're in it, I want you to help us. Not by indulging in any sleuth stunts of your own, but by helping me with your intelligence. It's brain-power we want, if we are to circumvent the Funny Toff."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"IF MY brain is of any use, it is very willingly at your disposal," replied Dick. "But I confess, though I have thought a lot about this business, I'm no further forward than I was. I suppose that your people have had a look at that house in Creek Street?"

"We have been over every inch of it with a magnifying glass," replied Sir Edric. "It has been condemned by the sanitary authorities, and has been empty a long time. By the look of it, it seems to have served the youthful population of Wapping as a playground. The whole place is full of dirty finger-prints and footmarks. You couldn't hope to isolate any one of them."

"From what you tell me of this man, I should imagine that he never gave the same rendezvous twice," remarked Dick. "There must be hundreds of empty houses suitable for such a purpose, and of course he would be careful to leave no traces behind him. Talking of traces, there was nothing to be made out of that house near Rainham, I take it?"

Sir Edric shook his head. "The rain on Saturday night effectively washed out all footmarks, and Pollard tells me that he hasn't been able to get a readable finger-print," he replied. "There's one thing pretty certain, that Herridge was carried there, alive or dead, by water. Nobody was seen walking over the marshes, at all events as long as daylight lasted. I expect the barge which was seen tied up to the wharf had something to do with it."

"I daresay it had," replied Dick. "As I told you, one of the men who spoke to me in the Margate Jetty was an obvious bargee. But, if you come to think of it, Herridge cannot have been taken from Wapping to Coldharbour Point in an ordinary barge. When was he last seen alive?"

"At about four o'clock," said Sir Edric. "But I don't quite follow——"

"Wait a bit," interrupted Dick. "Suppose he left Wapping by water for Coldharbour Point at four. Your barge was seen alongside the wharf about high water, say five o'clock. Now, the distance by river from Wapping to Coldharbour Point is about twelve knots. That means to say that if your barge conveyed him, she must have made twelve knots against the tide, which, as Euclid says, is absurd."

"One to you, Dick," remarked Sir Edric. "I hadn't thought of that."

"I haven't finished yet. See what it is to enlist a brain! Who told your people about the barge, Conway?"

"The Warden of Rainham ranges," replied Sir Edric. "They lie a little farther down the river from the wharf."

"Then he saw her from the shore. To be exact, he didn't see the barge at all. Her hull would be hidden by the sea-wall. He could only have seen her masts and sails."

"A sufficient reason for assuming the presence of the hull, even to a stickler for exactitude like you, Dick," replied Sir Edric dryly.

"Oh, I haven't a doubt that the barge was there all right. My point is that if a boat had come alongside her, the range warden would not have seen it. I be-

lieve that Herridge was brought from Wapping to the barge in a boat. Now, only a fast motor-boat could have made twelve knots against the tide.

"Even if the barge had nothing to do with it, a motor-boat must still have been employed. I don't think it possible that Herridge can have been drowned before he got to the wharf. The river is always pretty full of craft, especially about high water, and there would be considerable risk of the drowning being observed. Now, the doctor tells us that he died between four and six. Put it as the latest, and say six o'clock. The twelve miles must then have been covered in two hours, that is to say the craft that conveyed him must be capable of six knots. No sailing barge could have done that, with the wind in the south-east, as it was that night."

"Quite right," agreed Sir Edric. "I'll find out if the river police saw any signs of a motor-boat that evening."

"Yes, and you might make the same inquiries as to the night of Inspector Brooks's disappearance. You see what I'm getting at. It's my belief that our cheerful friend has been using that ruined cottage as a sort of private abattoir. I imagine that the unfortunate Brooks was lured to some lonely spot in Wapping, where he was set upon and tied up. He was then taken by water to Coldharbour Point, and there murdered, as Herridge was subsequently——"

"But Brooks was suffocated, not drowned," objected Sir Edric.

"Yes, I know. I was nearly suffocated myself. You forget those infernal refuse tips. They've been burning for years, and they must generate an enormous quantity of carbon dioxide. I don't know, for I haven't

tried the experiment, but I should think that if you chose a suitable spot on one of those tips, and threw a man into it, he'd be suffocated soon enough. It sounds pretty horrible, but horrors don't seem to deter these particular ruffians. Once he was dead, the rest would be easy. All they would have to do would be to put him in the packing-case, drive the lorry up to the cottage, and pick it up. They would naturally approach London from the west, in order to cover their traces."

"Ingenious, I admit," commented Sir Edric. "To think that, just before you came in, I was bewailing our lack of imagination! But, you know, Brooks's body showed no traces of his having been bound or gagged."

Dick waved this objection aside with an airy gesture. "A mere detail!" he exclaimed. "Mind, I don't maintain that this is what actually happened. I'm only offering suggestions. And, now I come to think of it, I don't know that they carry us much further. But I do believe that if you can trace that motor-boat, you will have found a clue."

"Well, we want one pretty badly," Sir Edric admitted. "I only hope it will not prove as barren as the ones we already have. We have been able to discover nothing about the lorry, and we don't seem to be able to learn anything about the case. It has been just the same with all the previous crimes in which we suspect the Funny Toff to have had a hand. He leaves nothing lying about which could possibly incriminate himself or his agents."

"Surely the diamonds, when he begins to dispose of them, will give him, or at all events his agents, away?" suggested Dick.

"I'm not so sure," replied Sir Edric. "You see, re-

ceiving and disposing of stolen goods is a trade, like everything else. As long as a receiver, fence, we call him, is in a small way of business, we have a chance. In order to live, he is bound to dispose of his stuff at once, and through the ordinary recognised channels. But, if a man was carrying on the trade on an extensive scale, he could afford to keep well-known stones, like those composing the necklace, up his sleeve for as long as it suited him. He could send agents, each with a few stones, all over the world. There are plenty of places where an odd stone or two could be disposed of, without awkward questions being asked. At the worst, he could re-cut the stones, and so alter their appearance."

"And you believe that the Funny Toff is a fence on this extensive scale?" asked Dick.

"I do," replied Sir Edric. "We've heard whispers of him more than once when there has been a big burglary. And it's a curious fact that, although big robberies are on the increase, the amount of stuff handled by the ordinary small fences has decreased enormously. It all points to one firm having, so to speak, made a corner in stolen property. And I'm convinced that that man is the Funny Toff."

"Who merely runs this murder business as a sort of side-line," commented Dick. "Well, if I am to lend you my brains, I'd better be told everything there is to know. I've got an idea at the back of my head, Conway. What became of the packing-case in which Brooks's body arrived?"

"I've got it locked away downstairs," replied Sir Edric. "Would you like to see it?"

"Yes, but, if possible, not under the disapproving eye of Inspector Pollard," said Dick. "Pollard, I am

quite sure, regards me as an interloper, and he doesn't share your flattering estimate of my brain-power."

"We'll go and have a look at it together, without disturbing Pollard," replied Sir Edric. "He's a better man than you think; give him an idea and he'll follow it out through thick and thin. But his conception of a criminal is a fellow with rubber soles and a handkerchief round his neck. He lacks imagination, and I believe he's rather proud of that fact. Come along."

Sir Edric led the way to the ground floor, where he unlocked a door, which he closed behind them. The packing-case stood on a pair of trestles, which gave it something of the appearance of a coffin. The straw had been thrown back into it, and Dick proceeded to remove it handful by handful, shaking it carefully as he did so.

"Just an ordinary machinery case," he muttered. "Made to fit a part of some gadget or other. It was put together by an engineer, rather than a carpenter. No neat joints, but a thoroughly strong and massive job. Look at the bolts for securing the lid, for instance. But there's nothing about it that I can see which gives any clue to its origin."

He had removed all the straw by now, and was bending over the case, his head and shoulders buried in it. "No, there's no mark of any kind inside it," he said, with an air of disappointment. "I'm afraid it's no use, Conway. Anyhow, I've wasted enough of your time this morning. I'll get back home and have a think, and if anything comes of it, I'll let you know."

He left his friend rather abruptly, and took a taxi back to his rooms. Once safely there, he put his hand in his pocket, and withdrew a minute clod of dried

mud, which, from its shape, had evidently fallen from a boot. This he looked at with considerable satisfaction. It was almost certain that the boot had belonged to Inspector Brooks, and it was in the hope of finding something of the kind that he had examined the case.

For Dick, although very few of his friends suspected it, had many scientific interests, among which was a penchant for geology, and the constitution of soils. His idea now was, that he might find traces of Essex mud and clay, and so confirm his theory that Brooks had met his death in the neighbourhood of Rainham. He took the clod between his fingers, and crumbled it on to a sheet of white paper. Then, spreading it out, he examined it very carefully through a powerful glass.

As he did so, his face assumed an expression of disappointment. The fragments beneath his eyes showed no trace of clayey mud. They consisted almost entirely of fragments of limestone, such as might have accumulated on any country road. But they had one rather uncommon characteristic. The larger fragments showed a distinct bluish-grey tinge.

"Mountain limestone," he muttered. "Found in a good many places in England, and used extensively for road-metal. That doesn't help us much. Hullo, here's something different!"

With the point of a needle he isolated one of the fragments, and looked at it long and earnestly, through the lens.

"Well, I'm damned!" he exclaimed at last. "How the devil did that get there?"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DICK sorted the fragments very carefully, and picked out several similar to the one which had excited his astonishment. These he placed in a pill-box, which he wrapped up in paper. Then he went out and walked round the corner to the Geological Museum in Jermyn Street, where he asked for an acquaintance of his, whom he knew to be an expert in the identification of minerals.

He was shown into this Mr. Tennant's room, and the two men shook hands cordially. Dick explained that he wished for an opinion upon some samples which he had brought, and produced the pill-box for Tennant's inspection.

"Hullo!" remarked the latter, as he looked at the fragments through his lens. "Are you thinking of interesting yourself in a lead-mine? I think I can identify this stuff at a glance, but I'll just test it, to make sure."

He placed one of the fragments upon a piece of charcoal, and sprinkled it with a pinch of white powder. Then he directed the flame of a blow-pipe upon it. The fragment appeared to dissolve, leaving behind it a tiny globe of molten metal, which soon cooled and assumed a dull-grey colour.

"I thought so," remarked Tennant. "That's galena, lead sulphide, the commonest ore of lead. Do you want a quantitative analysis? You'll have to bring

me some more of the sample if you want an accurate result."

"I haven't got any more just now," replied Dick. "I haven't really gone into the matter yet. What part of England do you suppose this comes from?"

Tennant shrugged his shoulders. "I really couldn't say," he replied. "Galena is pretty widely distributed, as you know. It occurs in the limestone of Cumberland, Derbyshire, and the Mendips, and, mixed with clay, in Cornwall. Small quantities are found in many other places, but those are its principal sources."

Dick thanked him, and after some further conversation he took his leave and returned to his rooms. Tennant had merely confirmed what he himself had suspected. The fragments were galena. But how on earth did they come to be adhering to Inspector Brooks's boots? However widely galena was distributed, it certainly was not found in the Essex marshes, nor did it seem a likely constituent of the rubbish of the refuse tips. It seemed that he would have to abandon his theory as to the place of the Inspector's death.

What was the alternative? Where could Brooks have been, to have collected fragments of galena on his boots? The principal sources of the mineral were Cumberland, Derbyshire, the Mendips and Cornwall, Tennant had said. Any of these localities was therefore possible. In the first three it occurred in conjunction with limestone, in the fourth with clay. But the clod of dried mud had contained fragments of limestone, and no trace of clay. That seemed to point to one of the first three.

Dick took out a map of England, and laid it on the table before him. If the lorry conveying the Inspec-

tor's body had started from Cumberland or Derbyshire, it would naturally have approached London from the north or north-west, and a considerable detour would have been necessary for it to pass anywhere near Brentbridge. On the other hand, the obvious route from the Mendips would be by Bath or old Exeter roads, which converged not far from Brentbridge. On the whole, Dick thought, the lorry driver would have preferred to make no unnecessary detours with such a questionable load on board. There was no reason for the selection of Brentbridge as the place near which to throw the case off. Any fairly secluded spot in the neighbourhood of London would have suited his purpose. On the whole, it seemed most likely that he started from some district in the west or south-west.

This pointed to the Mendips. Dick knew that at one time lead had been extensively worked in this district, but that the mines had long since been abandoned, since the ore was no longer found in sufficient quantities to make its extraction worth while. Again, the peculiar bluish-grey colour of the limestone fragments was characteristic of the Mendips mountain limestone. Was it possible that Brooks had been murdered in some lonely spot among the deserted moorlands of the Mendip hills?

Dick lay back in his chair and closed his eyes. Fleeting pictures of the Mendips passed through his mind; the wide stretches of uncultivated moor, Cheddar Gorge, the fish in Blagdon Reservoir, the neglected ruins where the lead mines had once stood. Plenty of space here to commit a murder, far from any human dwelling-place. But why select a spot so far from London?

Of course, his deduction might be all wrong. He found himself wondering what the matter-of-fact Pollard would say if he told him that, from a fragment of mud found in a packing-case, he had inferred that Inspector Brooks had been murdered in the Mendips. No, that would never do. Imagination was all very well, but even Conway would smile, and suggest that this was carrying it too far. On the other hand, he felt convinced that he was on the right track. In an instant his mind was made up. He would go and spy out the land himself, before he propounded his new theory at Scotland Yard.

He had an appointment to dine and dance with Alison that evening, and he resolved to tell her his plans as soon as he met her. But, as it happened, she too had an announcement to make. "Father is going back to Lestridge Hall the day after tomorrow," she said. "And he's asked me to go with him. You know that I shall hate leaving London, Dick dear, but I must go. Father's very fond of me, and he suggested rather pathetically that he won't see much of me once we're married. Of course I said I'd go. You do understand, don't you?"

"Of course I understand, darling, but don't be away too long," replied Dick.

"If I am away more than a week or two, you must come and stay with us," said Alison. "You've never been to Lestridge Hall, and it's an awfully jolly place. You could manage a day or two of quite decent hunting. It would do you good, you're getting lazy."

"I believe you're right," replied Dick. "As a matter of fact, I've been thinking of going down to a little pub I know of, in Somersetshire, and having a day with the Mendip pack."

"It wouldn't do you any harm," she replied brightly. "It would keep you from brooding over my absence. Besides, it'll keep you out of mischief. You won't be tempted to play Sherlock Holmes any more. What is the address of your pub in case I should feel disposed to write to you?"

"The Anchor and Hope Inn, Priddy, near Wells," said Dick. "It's not a bad little place, if you don't mind isolation and plain food. I might be there a week, if it's decent hunting weather."

So it was arranged, and on the following morning early Dick started off alone in his car. He chose the Bath road, and sped over its broad and somewhat uninteresting surface as far as Beckhampton. Here he turned to the left, and went on through Devizes and Trowbridge to Frome, where he lunched at the George. From there, after consulting his map, he took the old turnpike road, which climbs steadily, avoiding most of the villages which cling to the slopes of the rising ground, until it reaches the summit of the eastern Mendips at Masbury.

Here he stopped the car, and again consulted his map. He was still five or six miles from his destination, but this was an admirable spot from which to survey the surrounding country. The road ran along a ridge, from which an extensive panorama stretched out in either direction. On the one side was the line of the Quantocks, with the loom of Exmoor on the far horizon, and Glastonbury Tor sharply defined in the foreground. On the other was an undulating country, shadowed in the distance by the smoke of Bristol. And in front of him, a bare and rugged skyline, was the border-land of the eastern Mendips.

He had chosen the Anchor and Hope, which he had

visited years before, as being more or less in the centre of the disused lead-mines. Also he knew that the landlord kept one or two reliable hacks, which he hired to those who enjoyed a gallop with the Mendip hounds. Settled there, with a horse to ride, he could assume the guise of a London sportsman, with no object in view but to stir his sluggish liver. He folded up his map, started the car again, and proceeded by a series of lanes, running straight and deserted between low stone walls, to the cross-roads at which stood the Anchor and Hope.

The inn had once, when the mines were at the height of their prosperity, been a hostelry of considerable importance. The village of Priddy, lonely and decaying round its wide green, lay rather more than a mile away, and the inn stood, gaunt and bare, the only house within sight. It was hard to believe that this had once been the centre of a thriving industrial district. Nothing remained of its former activity but a few grass-grown spoil heaps, and here and there the tumbled ruins of a pit-head or a smelting furnace. A great solitude covered the land, a solitude which seemed the more melancholy in the fading light of the short afternoon.

A strange face greeted Dick as he entered the inn. The place had changed hands since Dick had last visited it. He was rather glad of this, since he had no wish to be recognised. He asked for a cup of tea, and, while it was being prepared he got into conversation with the landlord. He learnt that a couple of horses were still kept, and then, as though the idea had only just occurred to him, asked if he could stop for a few nights and hire one.

The landlord was delighted. "I'll put you up with

pleasure, sir," he said. "I often has a gentleman like you here for the hunting. But I'm afraid you'll find it a bit rough, sir. We don't exactly go in for the hotel business up here. And I shall have to see the missus about getting some grub in."

"Oh, that's all right, I'm not particular," replied Dick easily. "If any food is wanted, I'll run you into Wells in the car after tea. I shall have to send a wire to tell my people where I'm staying. What about having a look at those horses of yours?"

That evening Dick spent in the bar parlour, listening to the talk of the three or four men who dropped in from the neighbouring farms. Their conversation was mainly concerned with agricultural matters, the prospects for the roots, the price of milk, the iniquity of the pig-buyers. The oracle to whom every doubtful point was referred was a fine-looking old man, tall and spare, with a patriarchal white beard. Dick gradually edged his way into the conversation, and was at last rewarded by establishing direct contact with the ancient.

"Thanks, sir," he said, in reply to Dick's invitation. "Another pint of cider won't come amiss. Yes, sir, 'tis a terrible poor country, and it takes a good man to make farming pay hereabouts. But 'tweren't always like that. I mind my dad saying that there was plenty of money about when the mines was working."

"It seems a pity that they can't be re-opened," remarked Dick.

"Aye, 'tis a pity," agreed the old man. "But the ore is all used up, that's what it is. There's been folk coming here, off and on, these last fifty years, trying if they couldn't find enough to work, but 'tis no good."

"Them chaps what bought that old mine over Nord-

rach way don't seem to have done nothing," put in one of the listeners.

"Nay, nor likely to," replied the old man contemptuously. "Two or three chaps from London they was, sir. Bought up one of they ruined mines for a song, so I heard tell. They talked very high, five years ago come April 'twill be when they first come. But nothing never came of it. They worked there for a bit, and then went away. Some of them comes down now and then and has a look at the place, but that's all."

Nevertheless, Dick went to bed fully determined to have a look at the ruined mine out Nordrach way.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

NEXT morning, after a breakfast which did credit to the hospitality of the Anchor and Hope, Dick set out on his tour of exploration, mounted on the more powerful-looking of the landlord's two horses. At first he set his horse's head towards Priddy, but, when out of sight of the inn, took a wide right-handed sweep, until he was heading in the direction of Nordrach.

He passed several heaps of tumbled stone, each marking the position of one of the old lead-workings, but none of these were sufficiently isolated for his purpose. At last he came to one lying in a slight hollow, and here he halted. He tied his horse to a stunted shrub growing among the ruins, and proceeded on foot towards a dilapidated fence surrounding the mouth of the shaft.

It was a lonely spot, and he felt reasonably secure from observation. He wished to preserve his rôle of idle visitor, and had no desire to manifest an interest in prospecting. The mingled grass and heather which clothed the moorland had spread right up to the shaft, but here and there were patches of bare earth. He bent over one of these, and scraped up some of the surface with his hand. His magnifying glass was in his pocket, and through this he examined the sample he had collected. For the most part it consisted of particles of limestone, but here and there he detected the dull reflection of a fragment of galena.

"Just the same as the clod that fell from Brooks's boot," he muttered, wiping his hands on the heather. "It looks as though I were right after all. Now, let's see if I can think this out."

He lighted a cigarette, and sat down on a convenient stone. How to account for Brooks's presence in the Mendips, that was the difficulty. When he was last seen alive, he had been following a group of men from the door of the Margate Jetty in Wapping, a hundred and forty miles away. Four days later, his body had been thrown out of a lorry near Brentbridge. What had been his movements during the interval?

That it was impossible even to conjecture. If he had obtained a clue to the theft of the Hardway diamonds at Wapping, he would naturally follow it up, and it must be supposed that the trail had led to the Mendips. One thing was certain, that he had been alive when he reached that destination. A dead man requires to be carried, and is not likely to collect mud on the soles of his boots. No, he must have walked over soil similar to that which Dick had just examined.

How had he travelled from Wapping to the Mendips? That, Dick realised, was a matter for Scotland Yard to determine. Inquiries could be set on foot at all likely railway stations, at all the inns in the neighbourhood. But Dick was disinclined to communicate with the Yard until he had something more definite to show. At present he had nothing more convincing than a few grains of earth.

The most probable theory seemed to be that Brooks had overheard something which suggested the Mendips to him. He was not likely to have followed his men all that distance without communicating with the Yard and enlisting the services of a companion. It

was therefore reasonable to suppose that he had undertaken the journey to investigate some particular spot, since he was not likely to have set out without warning to explore the whole extent of the Mendips. Arrived at that spot, he had been overcome by superior force, and murdered.

A fresh idea struck Dick, and he walked over to the shaft and gazed down it. He could see no bottom, nothing but a profound and inky blackness. He picked up a stone and dropped it into the shaft, watching the second-hand of his watch as he did so. The stone reached the bottom with a hollow thud, showing that the shaft was dry. Two and a half seconds. That would make the depth of this particular shaft about a hundred feet. If this was typical of the average disused shaft hereabouts, this suggested a possible means by which Brooks had been murdered. A dry shaft of such a depth would almost certainly be full of foul air, carbon dioxide, in other words. Perhaps Brooks had been killed by being lowered into some similar shaft. Lowered, not thrown. His body had shown no traces of bruising.

Yes, but how to find the actual shaft? The whole countryside was dotted with them. But there were certain considerations which narrowed the search. In the first place, if Dick's theory were correct, Brooks must have been ambushed; he could not have been attacked in the open, or a struggle would have ensued of which his body would have shown traces. An ambush presupposed a shaft with some cover round it, unlike the one by which Dick stood. And, from what he had seen up to the present, there was very little cover, which implied buildings, remaining round any of the workings.

His task, then, was to find a disused working, of which some of the original buildings were in a fair state of repair. This immediately suggested the mine out Nordrach way. From what he had heard, an attempt had been made to re-open it, and it was reasonable to suppose that the buildings had been repaired to some extent for that purpose. He mounted his horse once more, and trotted off in the direction of Nordrach, deviating now and then to look at any likely ruins.

He was within a mile or two of the village when his eye was caught by a more solid-looking building than he had yet seen. It was a grey, square structure, with the remains of a tall chimney beside it. It stood on the slope of a hill, with a few stunted trees in front of it, and he realised that he would not have noticed it, had he approached it from any other direction. He rode towards it, and found that a track ran from it towards a lane a few hundred yards away. And this track bore the marks of wheels, which had passed over it at no very distant period.

This must be the mine which the old man had referred to the previous evening. The point was, did it conceal the shaft where Brooks had been murdered? Dick walked his horse round the place, and found at the back a yard adjoining it, surrounded by a high wall. In this wall was a stout wooden door, upon which was some faded wording. Dick, with some difficulty, made it out as "The High Mendip Mining Syndicate."

He dismounted, and tried the gate. As he had feared, it was locked, and there was no possibility of his being able to force it, even had he cared to venture the attempt. But it occurred to him that by climbing the hill overlooking the building he might at least be enabled to overlook the yard.

He put the idea into practice and, after some stiff climbing, found a spot from which he could see over the high wall. He had slung a pair of field-glasses over his shoulder before he started, and with these he examined the interior of the yard. The result was not very encouraging. One corner was filled with a heap of what looked, at a distance, like ore. A few rusty girders and the broken parts of a winding-engine occupied most of the space, the grass growing up between them. And this, beyond the fact that there was a door leading from the building into the yard, was all that he could see. The High Mendip Mining Syndicate had evidently abandoned operations in despair.

Yet something told him that if, indeed, Brooks had met his end among the Mendips, this must be the spot. His reasoning had led him to look for just such a place, and he found it. But he realised that, even if he had been able to effect an entry, he would probably have found nothing to confirm his suspicions. His experiences had shown him that the gang he was pursuing left no traces behind them. He reached the inn at Nordrach and demanded refreshments, for himself and his horse. While he was eating his bread and cheese he contrived to engage the proprietor in talk. Although he skilfully brought the conversation round to the syndicate's mine, he learnt no more than he had heard at the Anchor and Hope. Nobody worked at the place now; the proprietor had heard that it was to be abandoned. "Even if they found ore there, they'd have a terrible job to get the metal away," he said. "There isn't a station for miles round, and the roads is that bad you couldn't take a decent load over them. So far as I know, nobody ever goes near the place, except perhaps once or twice a year, when some-

body comes, to see if the place is still there, I suppose. Not but what a dozen men might work there night and day for anything anybody would see or hear of them."

Dick returned to the Anchor and Hope by a circuitous route, searching the country for any other workings which would fit in with his theory, but finding none. The syndicate's property seemed to be the only one which had not been allowed to fall into complete decay. It seemed a sad fate to overtake an industry which, as Dick knew, had flourished in Roman times, and probably even earlier.

As he rode along, the words of the proprietor of the inn at Nordrach kept recurring to him. "A dozen men might work there night and day without attracting attention," he had said. But if they came and went by night, and carried out their purposes by day, they would be doubly safe. Suppose that the gang knew of the existence of this place, what an admirable spot it would afford them for the removal of their "enemies." Dick felt that he could add a few more details to his imaginative re-construction of Brooks's end. A clue had been dropped in his hearing, which would infallibly lead him to the spot. Some of the gang had gone down at once, probably on the lorry, and by night. On Brooks's arrival, he had been ambushed and murdered. Any ordinary criminals would have left his body in the shaft, feeling certain that it would never be discovered. But their mysterious chief had other ideas. The body must be flaunted in the face of the police, a warning to them not to meddle in his affairs. So, at once, the lorry started back with its grim load, and the workings were once more deserted.

It was late in the afternoon when Dick returned to the Anchor and Hope. Thin wisps of fog were driv-

ing up over the desolate moorland, wrapping the most ordinary things in an unfamiliar disguise. As he dismounted at the doorway, the landlord came out to him. "There's a telegram come for you, sir," he announced.

Dick threw him the reins, and hurried into the house, possessed by a sudden sense of uneasiness. A telegram was lying on the table in the narrow hall, and he picked it up and tore open the envelope. The message had been handed in at Regent Street post office at two o'clock that afternoon. "Can you return to London at once, Alison."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ON THE morning following Dick's tour of exploration of the Mendips, Inspector Pollard reached the Yard in no very good humour. His researches so far had failed to produce any results which strengthened his theory as to the identity of the Funny Toff. On the other hand, nothing had transpired to refute it. But the theory itself was so bizarre that he felt it was useless even to mention it until it had received some striking confirmation.

He had not been in his office more than a few minutes when his telephone rang and he was summoned to the presence of the Assistant Commissioner. Sir Edric was in an obvious state of perturbation, and plunged into the cause of his summons without delay.

"There's been a burglary at 321 Park Lane," he announced. "A message has just come through, with an outline of the particulars. The house belongs to a Mr. Ibbotson. You probably know him by name, he's a retired money-lender, I believe. You may have seen in the paper that he bought the famous Maharajah's Rubies, as they are called, at Christie's, only last week. Well, the rubies have gone.

"It seems that the family were away for a day or two. The rubies, with a lot of other jewellery, were deposited in a safe in the butler's pantry, where the plate was kept. This morning the butler discovered that the safe had been opened, and that the rubies had disappeared. Nothing else had been touched

apparently. That's all I know at present, but I can't help feeling that our friend the Funny Toff had a hand in the matter."

Pollard wasted no time in asking questions. "I'll go round at once, sir," he replied.

He found Mr. Ibbotson's house in the possession of a sergeant and a couple of men. The sergeant was about to tell him what he had heard, but Pollard interrupted him. "I'll hear all that later," he said. "I want to have a look at that butler's pantry before any one else turns up."

The sergeant led him to the pantry, which was situated in the basement. It was a fair-sized room, fitted with the usual glass-fronted cupboards. Let into one of the walls was a comparatively modern safe, by a well-known maker. Pollard walked up to it, and tried the handle, having first examined it for finger-marks. The safe was unlocked, and he swung the door open.

"The butler found the safe unlocked when he came in here this morning, sir," ventured the sergeant.

"I'll hear his story later," replied Pollard impatiently. He set to work to examine the safe minutely. It was obvious that it had been opened with a key, there was no sign of force having been used. He gave instructions for a man from the safe-makers to be sent for, and proceeded to examine the room with the most meticulous care.

The window was shut, and securely fastened. It looked out upon a sunken courtyard, and was protected by a row of iron bars, not more than four inches apart. The floor, which was covered with linoleum, bore abundant footmarks, but after a cursory inspection of these, Pollard turned away in disgust. It was obvious

that the sergeant and his men had trampled all over the place. Then he turned his attention to the door.

There was nothing unusual about this. It was a solid oak door, fitted with an ordinary lock. The door-handles were of white porcelain, and the key was in the outside of the lock. Pollard proceeded to dust the two handles with a fine powder, and immediately uttered a grunt of satisfaction. The outer handle bore a perfect set of prints of a man's fingers. He bent down to examine these, and remained so long staring at them with an expression of stupefaction that the sergeant feared he had gone into a trance.

"Go and ask the butler if he's got a small screw-driver!" he exclaimed suddenly, his voice tremulous with suppressed excitement.

The sergeant disappeared, to return in a few minutes with the required tool. Pollard took it from him, and unscrewed the inner handle, removing it and leaving the square bar exposed. This he pushed through the door, until he was able to remove it and the outer handle, still affixed to it. He then searched in the cupboards till he found a tin box suitable to his requirements. This he emptied of its contents, and placed the handle and bar in it, packing the bar round with paper, so that the handle would stand up in the tin without fear of its coming into contact with it. This delicate operation accomplished, he put on the lid of the box, and turned once more to the sergeant. "Now I'm ready to interview the butler," he said.

The butler, whose name was Burke, appeared at the sergeant's summons. He was an elderly man, and his face bore traces of pitiable horror and alarm. Pollard received him kindly, and told him to sit down.

"Now then, Burke, tell us what you know about the business."

Burke complied, in a long and rather rambling statement. He had gone to bed soon after eleven the previous night, having locked up as usual. It was his custom to lock the pantry door, but to leave the key in the lock. When he came downstairs in the morning, the first thing he noticed was that the pantry door was open. This did not at first astonish him, as he supposed that one of the other servants had had occasion to go in for something. It was his intention to spend the morning polishing the plate, and for that purpose he took out the key of the safe and inserted it in the lock. He then discovered that the safe was already unlocked, and, on opening it, he found that the case containing the rubies was missing. Without saying anything to anybody in the house, he immediately telephoned to police.

These were the main facts in his statement, disentangled from a mass of repetition and irrelevant detail. Pollard, from his experience of men, had very little doubt that he was telling the truth. However, he proceeded to question him minutely. In reply to his questions, certain other facts were elicited.

Mr. and Mrs. Ibbotson were the only regular occupants of the house with the exception of five servants. Their four sons and daughters were married, and though they frequently came to stay, none of them had done so within the preceding ten days. On the previous afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Ibbotson had driven down to their eldest son's house in Surrey, to spend a couple of nights. Before they left, Mr. Ibbotson had told Burke that he had received a telephone message which might make it necessary for him to return to

London that night, but that Burke need not wait up for him. Mr. and Mrs. Ibbotson were frequently out at night until very late. It was the rule of the house, that, unless they ordered otherwise, the household went to bed. Mr. Ibbotson had a latch-key, with which he could let himself in. Burke, knowing of Mr. Ibbotson's possible return the previous night, had not bolted the front door.

The safe had two keys. One was in the possession of Mr. Ibbotson, the other Burke carried on a bunch with the keys of the cellar and other departments in his charge. Burke had slept with this key under his pillow, and was absolutely certain that it had not been used to open the safe.

At this point the sergeant was called from the room, to return with an important air. He whispered something in Pollard's ear. "All right, Burke, that will do for the present," he said. And when Burke had left the room: "Now then, sergeant, I'll see your man."

A constable of C Division was ushered in, and with a few curt questions Pollard elicited his story. He had been on duty in Park Lane the previous night, and at about twelve-thirty he had seen a man let himself into Number 321 with a latch-key. He had taken no particular notice, as there was nothing unusual in such an event. However, hearing of the burglary, he had thought it his duty to report the matter.

The man had arrived in a saloon car, which had immediately driven off. He had not noticed its number. He had not caught sight of the man's face, but was sure that he was in evening dress. He was tall, and was wearing a dark coat and an opera hat. The man had entered the house and shut the door behind him.

The constable had subsequently moved on, and had seen nobody leave the house.

Pollard nodded. This confirmed the suspicion he had already formed. He spent the next hour in interviewing the remainder of the servants, without learning anything of much interest. He found no grounds for believing that any of them were in league with the burglar.

He had barely completed his task when Mr. Ibbotson arrived, having driven post-haste back from Surrey, in reply to a telephone message from Burke. He was naturally very much perturbed, and it took some time for Pollard to soothe him sufficiently to enable him to answer questions coherently.

"I'm sure you'll give me every assistance you can, Mr. Ibbotson," he began. "In the first place, may I ask where you keep your key of the safe?"

"In my pocket," replied Mr. Ibbotson promptly, producing a silver ring with two keys on it. "As you see, I keep it separate from the remainder of my keys, with the key of the front door. I took them down to my son's place, and they were locked in a drawer of my dressing-table all night."

"You never leave these keys about, I suppose?" suggested Pollard.

"Never!" replied Mr. Ibbotson emphatically. "I may say that the key of the safe has never been out of my possession since I have had it. With one exception, for a very short time, that is," he added as an afterthought.

"May I ask what this occasion was?" inquired Pollard.

"Oh, it was of no importance. My wife and I

were at the Eros—it's a night-club, as you probably know—last September. The 24th it was, I remember the date, because it is the anniversary of our wedding-day. We had been dancing, and when we got back to our table, I happened to put my hand in my pocket, and found that the keys were missing. I told the manager of the place, and the keys were found under one of the tables when the place was cleaned up. They must have fallen out when I was dancing, and got kicked aside. The man sent them back to me next morning. I remember that we had a job to get into the house that night. We had to knock up poor old Burke, and it took a devil of a time to wake him."

"You don't suspect Burke of having had any part in the theft last night, do you, sir?" Pollard asked.

"Burke? No fear! I'd trust him with everything I possess," replied Mr. Ibbotson decisively.

"Now, sir, to turn to another matter," continued Pollard. "Burke informs me that you had a telephone call just before you left yesterday. Would you mind telling me the nature of it?"

"Certainly. One of my solicitor's clerks rang up, and told me that some flaw was suspected in the title of some property which I am purchasing. The purchase was to be completed to-day, and the matter was therefore rather urgent. He wished to know if I could go round to the office at ten this morning. I told him that I was bound to take my wife down to Surrey, but if the matter was really urgent, I would return here that night. He replied that if his suspicions of a flaw were confirmed, he would telephone to me at my son's house yesterday evening. If he did not telephone, I might take it that everything was correct. Since he did not telephone, I did not trouble to come back."

"Were you acquainted with the clerk's voice, Mr. Ibbotson?" inquired Pollard.

"No, I can't say that I was. I usually deal with my solicitor himself."

"Would you mind ringing up your solicitor, and asking him if such a message was ever sent?"

Mr. Ibbotson agreed, and left the room. His place was taken by the man from the safe manufacturers, who, after a brief inspection, declared that the safe had been opened by a perfectly-fitting key. Mr. Ibbotson then returned, with the news that his solicitor denied all knowledge of the message.

At this Pollard took his leave, after assuring Mr. Ibbotson that no pains would be spared to trace the rubies. He then called a taxi, and went off with the tin box containing the door-handle under his arm. The case was clear enough. Mr. Ibbotson's keys had been taken from his pocket at the Eros, and retained long enough for an impression in wax to be made of them. From this impression, duplicate keys had been made. The thief had telephoned in the name of the solicitor's clerk, and had left a message which would ensure that the front door should not be bolted, in case of Mr. Ibbotson's return. Then, armed with the duplicate keys, he had walked into the house, under the constable's very eyes, and opened the safe. The question was, who was the thief?

Pollard lay back in the corner of the taxi. "I've got him this time!" he muttered, in a tone of intense satisfaction.

CHAPTER TWENTY

POLLARD's first act on reaching Scotland Yard was to take the tin containing the door-knob to the fingerprint department, and to give the official in charge there certain instructions. He then requested an interview with the Assistant Commissioner, which was readily granted.

"Well, Pollard, what do you make of this business of the Maharajah's Rubies?" was Sir Edric's greeting.

"I'd like to discuss it with you, sir, if I may," replied Pollard gravely. "I think I've got a line upon it already."

"Good man!" exclaimed Sir Edric. "Fire away. What have you discovered?"

"I'll give you the details later, sir. The theft was organised by some one who must have been acquainted with Mr. Ibbotson and his house in Park Lane. It has evidently been in preparation for some time. The first move was made last September, when Mr. Ibbotson's keys were taken from his pocket at the Eros night-club, and wax impressions made of the key of the safe and the front door."

Sir Edric smiled. "I shouldn't be surprised at anything happening at some of these places," he remarked. "You've no clue to who took the keys? One of the waiters, I suppose?"

Pollard shook his head. "One of the members, I fancy, sir," he replied. "You get all sorts of queer people at these posh places. Why, I spent three or

four nights at the Eros myself, when I was looking into that Crampton affair, and jolly glad I was when it was over. Well, what's one man's meat is another man's poison, I suppose, sir. But it's a queer thing that this should have happened in September, long before Mr. Ibbotson bought the rubies."

"I don't think that need worry you, Pollard," remarked Sir Edric. "I imagine the idea then was merely to secure a means of access to Mr. Ibbotson's safe. You see, he is pretty well known as a buyer of valuables. He deals in these things as a sort of hobby. I have no doubt that when he bought the rubies, he had some customer in his mind who would take them off his hands at a profit. This habit of his being known, it was pretty certain that sooner or later the safe would contain something worth going for."

"Ah, that explains it, sir," replied Pollard, in a tone of satisfaction. "Now, yesterday afternoon Mr. Ibbotson had arranged to go down for a couple of nights to his son's place in Surrey. The thief must have known of this, so far as I can see, and decided to go for the rubies in his absence. Anyhow, he rang up Mr. Ibbotson just before he started, saying he was his solicitor's clerk, and gave a message about some property that Mr. Ibbotson is buying. Now, that shows that the thief must have known a good deal about his affairs. At all events, he knew the name of the solicitor and the fact that Mr. Ibbotson was buying property."

"I'm afraid that leaves you a pretty wide field to cover," said Sir Edric. "Ibbotson, as I told you, is a retired money-lender, and I expect that lots of unfortunate people have good cause to know the name of his solicitors. As to the purchase of the property, well,

Ibbotson, by all accounts, is very fond of boasting to his many acquaintances of his means and the use he makes of them. I expect plenty of people knew about this property."

"Well, that's as may be, sir," admitted Pollard, rather reluctantly. "Now, as it happens, the telephone message was so worded that it left Mr. Ibbotson uncertain as to whether or not he would have to return to London last night. If a further message was sent down to him in Surrey, he was to come back. If not, he could stay where he was. This was evidently to prevent the butler bolting the front door."

"I see," remarked Sir Edric. "The thief had merely to walk into the house after the servants had gone to bed."

"Exactly, sir. Now, as it happens, the constable on beat saw the man enter the house. Naturally, he took no particular notice, and he didn't see the man's face. He drove up in a car, which did not wait, and let himself in with a latch-key. He was in evening dress, and must have been a pretty cool hand. He just went down to the basement, unlocked the butler's pantry, opened the safe with a key, and took out the rubies. All he had to do then was to open the door again and walk out. But it was so easy that he got careless. He made one mistake, and that's where we caught him out, sir."

"This sounds interesting," observed Sir Edric. "You don't seem to have wasted your time, Pollard. What was this mistake he made?"

"He left a perfect imprint of his fingers on the handle of the pantry door, sir," replied Pollard impressively.

"Can the finger-print people identify it?" asked Sir Edric quickly.

"It's just this matter of identification I want to talk to you about, sir," replied Pollard. "Will you excuse me a minute while I see if the finger-print people have got the photograph ready?"

Pollard left the room, to re-appear shortly with an envelope and the door-knob which he had removed from the house in Park Lane. "This is the handle of the pantry door, sir," he said, holding it out for the chief's inspection. "You see what a beautiful impression it is. It couldn't be better. You can see practically the whole hand, if you turn it round, sir."

"Excellent!" exclaimed Sir Edric. "I thought that even the crudest amateur had learnt to use gloves by this time. It looks rather as if one of Ibbotson's friends had been trying his 'prentice hand. Unless, of course, he took the rubies himself. We've heard of such things before."

Pollard shook his head. "I thought of that myself, sir," he replied. "But as soon as I saw these finger-prints I knew that couldn't be the case. I'll ask you to look at these, if you don't mind."

He picked up the envelope, and drew from it three photographs, marked respectively A, B, and C. A and B were photographs of the prints of the first two fingers and thumb of a right hand, C was in two parts, one the first two fingers and thumb, the other the rest of a right hand.

The Assistant Commissioner placed the three photographs on the desk before him, and examined them for several minutes in silence. "I'm not an expert," he remarked at last. "But it looks to me very much as

though these three prints had all been made by the same hand."

"They tell me in the finger-print department that there can be no doubt of it, sir," replied Pollard. "Now, as it happens, I secured them all myself. And as I'll explain, sir, I know whom they belong to."

"Can you lay your hands on him?" inquired Sir Edric eagerly.

"I think so, sir," replied Pollard. "But there are one or two things I'd like to explain first. As I told you, sir, I have been watching the Margate Jetty at Wapping. I arranged with the landlord that all the glasses used there of an evening were to be put aside. I had a man go round in the morning, before they were washed, and dust them over. I've got quite a decent collection of prints, that way. Most of them were the same, night after night. They'd be the regular customers. But in some cases, I only got one print, which means that the owner of it only visits the place occasionally. Now, sir, the photograph marked A belongs to one of these occasional visitors."

"From which you infer that the man who took the rubies was an occasional frequenter of the Margate Jetty," remarked Sir Edric. "Even I can see that C is a photograph of the impressions on the door-handle. That looks rather significant, doesn't it? The Hardway case led Brooks to the Margate Jetty, and we believe that the Funny Toff had a hand in that business. This seems to strengthen my suspicions that the Funny Toff is responsible for the disappearance of the Maharajah's rubies as well. What do you know of the man who was responsible for the imprints marked A?"

"Not very much, sir," replied Pollard. "They were

made the night after the discovery of Inspector Brooks's body, before I had got my system of checking the visitors to the Margate Jetty properly organised. However, the landlord told me that only one man he didn't know by sight came in that evening. He looked like a gentleman, but he must have been pretty broke, for he didn't pay for his own drinks.

"Now, sir, there's a lot we don't know about that Hardway business. If Herridge was telling the truth when I saw him, as I believe he was, I look at it this way. He had told his pals that he was going for the diamonds that night, and it had got to the Funny Toff's ears. But suppose he wasn't telling all the truth, suppose that he was working for the Funny Toff, who put him up to the job? The Funny Toff, as we know from other cases we've had, and as this business of the rubies proves, has friends in all sorts of posh circles. He would know all about the arrangements in Lord Hardway's house, as he knew all about Mr. Ibbotson. It struck me, as soon as I heard about this gentleman at the Margate Jetty, that he was the man we were looking for."

"I think I follow your reasoning," said Sir Edric. "Did you manage to trace this man?"

Pollard avoided the question. "Since we really know nothing about the Funny Toff, sir, I couldn't push my theory very much further, sir," he replied. "Then came the death of Herridge. Now, it's easy to see why his body was left with the diamond on it. It's the same as the sending of Brooks's body here—a warning of what comes of interfering with the Funny Toff. But why was he killed? Brooks was killed, I reckon, because he was on the Funny Toff's trail. But Herridge had done nothing, so far as I know, except

tell me the yarn about the two men who held him up. And there were precious few people who knew that he'd told me, sir."

Sir Edric exhibited visible signs of impatience. "Yes, yes, but I don't see that this brings us any nearer to the identity of the man whose finger-prints these are, the man who entered Mr. Ibbotson's house last night," he interrupted. "It seems to me that we are wasting valuable time. Do you, or do you not, know who he is?"

It had come to it at last, Pollard realised. There was no further possibility of circumlocution. He had put off the dramatic moment as long as he dared, feeling, in spite of the overwhelming proof which he held, that his chief would consider his theory too outrageous to be considered seriously. But now Pollard knew that he must put it to the test.

"I'm not in a position yet to answer that question positively, sir," he replied. "If you would consent, sir, I should first like to ask Mr. Penhampton a few questions in your presence."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

DICK happened to be in his rooms when Sir Edric's telephone message came through. "Yes, I'll come along at once," he replied. "Anything fresh? You'll tell me when you see me? Good!"

He took a taxi to Scotland Yard, and was immediately shown into Sir Edric's room. "Look here, Dick, there's been another burglary, and we think it's got something to do with our old friend. Pollard wants to ask you some questions. Of course, I haven't told him the details of your Wapping adventures, but he knows, naturally, that you tried your hand at amateur detection."

"And now he wants me to place my information at his disposal," replied Dick ruefully. "All right, I'm game."

Pollard was summoned. He contented himself with nodding rather stiffly towards Dick, and then, having secured a permissive nod from his Chief, he began his interrogation.

"Would you mind telling me, Mr. Penhampton, if you are acquainted with a Mr. Ibbotson, who lives at 321 Park Lane?" he asked.

"Ibbotson?" replied Dick. "The man who bought the Maharajah's rubies at Christie's the other day? Yes, I know him fairly well. I can't say that he's actually a friend of mine, but I've danced at his house, and I've seen him often enough at the Eros. Bit of a boulder, in my opinion. Always talking about his

money, and what he means to do with it. The last time I saw him, he was full of having bought some flats somewhere in the Manchester Square direction."

Pollard glanced at Sir Edric, who was listening intently. "You say you have seen him at the Eros club, Mr. Penhampton," he continued. "Are you a member?"

"Yes, I have been since it was started," replied Dick. "It's not a bad place. You meet some queer folk there, as you do in all these night-clubs, but it's not a bad place on the whole. You haven't been raiding it, have you, Inspector?"

Pollard took no notice of the question. "Were you there on the evening of September 24th last?" he asked.

Dick smiled. "Really, Inspector, I can't say off-hand," he replied. "I'm not one of those people who could tell you what they were doing every day of the year. I don't even keep a diary, which is, perhaps, just as well. All I can say is that I came back from shooting grouse in Yorkshire about the middle of the month, and did not go out of town again till October 1st. I know I went to the Eros two or three times about then."

"Do you remember seeing Mr. Ibbotson there about that time?"

Dick shrugged his shoulders. "One sees so many people," he replied. "I can't say that I particularly noticed Ibbotson. Wait a bit, though, I do remember one night seeing Ibbotson dancing with that massive wife of his, and thinking what a lamentable spectacle it was. Oh, yes, and there was some fuss about his having lost some keys or something. But I can't tell you what date it was."

Pollard glanced at Sir Edric, who was listening with a puzzled frown upon his face. He was immensely pleased with the result of his catechism, which confirmed his suspicions in every detail. By Dick's own confession, he knew Mr. Ibbotson, had been in his house, where no doubt he had made himself familiar with the situation of the safe. He had been at the Eros on the night when Mr. Ibbotson lost his keys, since he had admitted knowledge of that incident. Finally, he knew of the purchase of the property.

Pollard stood for a moment, apparently considering Dick's replies. And then suddenly, as though to catch him anawares, he shot out his vital question. "Would you mind telling me how you spent yesterday evening?" he asked.

Dick hesitated. He had no wish at present to mention his journey to the Mendips. He glanced at Sir Edric, and the curious expression of his friend's face suddenly warned him that these questions were of vital importance to himself. Without understanding what had happened, he knew that he was, in effect, undergoing examination. It was certain that Sir Edric would not have submitted him to it without good cause.

He saw at once that the only possible course for him to follow was to tell the exact truth. But, during the course of his reply, he addressed Sir Edric rather than Pollard, as though ignoring the official nature of the inquiry.

"Yesterday afternoon I was in Somersetshire," he replied. "I had driven down there the day before, and was staying at the Anchor and Hope Inn, near Wells. About four o'clock yesterday afternoon, I received a telegram, signed with Miss Weatherleigh's name, ask-

ing me to return to London at once. I have the telegram with me. Here it is. You will notice that it was handed in at Regent Street at 2.05 p.m. yesterday."

Dick handed the telegram to Sir Edric, who read it, nodded, and put it aside.

"About half-an-hour later I started to drive back to London," continued Dick. "It was about a quarter past nine when I reached my rooms. I immediately got on the telephone to Miss Weatherleigh's aunt, with whom she had been staying while she was in London. She informed me that it was impossible that Miss Weatherleigh could have sent the telegram herself, since she had left King's Cross at 11.30 that morning for Lestrige in Lincolnshire. Miss Weatherleigh's aunt had personally seen her off.

"I then thought that Miss Weatherleigh might have given the telegram to some one else, who had forgotten about it till two o'clock. I therefore put a trunk call through to Lestrige Hall, and spoke to Miss Weatherleigh herself. She assured me that she had sent no such telegram. She had travelled with her father to Lestrige Hall, where they had arrived safely. She had no motive for wishing me to return to London."

"What time did you speak to Miss Weatherleigh on the trunk line?" asked Pollard swiftly.

"It was between eleven and half-past when I got through," replied Dick.

"And, after that, what did you do?"

"I went to bed. I had had a long day before I started, and this and a drive of a hundred and forty miles or so without a stop had completely fagged me out. I did not get up till nine o'clock this morning."

"Your servant, of course, was waiting for you in your rooms?"

"No. As I expected to spend some days in Somersetshire, I had sent him away for three or four days' holiday."

"What did you do with your car, on your return to London?"

"I have a private lock-up in a mews close to my rooms. I drove the car in there, and locked it up."

"What is the number of your car, Mr. Penhampton?"

"LH 3437. It's a Sunbeam saloon, painted dark blue."

Pollard turned to Sir Edric. "A Sunbeam saloon car, bearing the registration number LH 3437, is at present standing in the car park in St. James's Square, sir," he said quietly. "It was driven there shortly before one o'clock this morning, by a man dressed as a chauffeur. Since it was still there at seven o'clock, which is against the regulations, the policeman on duty reported the matter. It has been verified that this number has been allotted to Mr. Penhampton." Then, before either the Assistant Commissioner or Dick could answer, he turned to the latter. "How do you account for your visit to Mr. Ibbotson's house, soon after midnight, Mr. Penhampton?"

"What on earth do you mean?" exclaimed Dick. "I haven't been near Ibbotson's place for weeks."

Sir Edric interposed authoritatively. "This has gone far enough, Pollard," he said sharply. "I should be glad if you will explain to me what reason you have for supposing that Mr. Penhampton visited Mr. Ibbotson."

"Certainly, sir," replied Pollard calmly. "I would

draw your attention once more to those three fingerprint photographs. The source of A I have already explained to you, sir. C is taken from the door-handle of the pantry at Mr. Ibbotson's. B I have not yet referred to. It is taken from a pocketbook of mine, in which Mr. Penhampton was kind enough to draw a sketch of the Hardway necklace at my request."

He spoke with such an air of conviction that even Sir Edric was for the moment shaken. "But, surely, Pollard, there must be some mistake!" he exclaimed.

"The matter can very easily be settled, sir, if Mr. Penhampton denies that these are his finger-prints," replied the Inspector.

"I do most emphatically deny that I ever touched Ibbotson's pantry door!" exclaimed Dick indignantly.

"May I telephone to the finger-print department, sir?" inquired Pollard.

He received the necessary permission, and in a few minutes an official from the department appeared with the necessary apparatus. Under his direction, Dick pressed the first two fingers and thumb of his right hand upon an inked pad, and then placed them on a sheet of white paper.

Sir Edric picked up the impression and glanced at it curiously. He then handed it, together with the three photographs, to the expert. "I should be glad if you would compare these," he said.

The expert took out a lens, and examined the imprint of Dick's fingers, comparing them with the three photographs. "I have no hesitation in saying that the four prints have been taken from the same fingers, sir," he declared at last.

Sir Edric dismissed him, and turned to Pollard, who was standing triumphantly in the background. "Well,"

he said, "admitting, for the moment, that these were Mr. Penhampton's finger-marks that you found on the door-knob, what is your theory?"

"That Mr. Penhampton's account of his doings last night is not strictly accurate, sir," replied Pollard firmly. "I believe that he returned from Somersetshire, as he had informed us. I have no doubt that he put a trunk call through to Lincolnshire. But I think that he forgets that he took his car out again afterwards, in company with a man dressed as a chauffeur, and drove to Mr. Ibbotson's house in Park Lane."

Dick laughed shortly. "It seems to be very little use my assuring you that I did nothing of the kind, Inspector," he said. "Surely the point is easily settled, without recourse to these somewhat grimy experiments. I take it that if I called at Ibbotson's, some one must have let me in? Why not ring up the house and find out?"

Pollard was about to reply, but Sir Edric silenced him with a gesture. "I think perhaps it will be best if you allow me to interview Mr. Penhampton alone, Inspector," he said. "I have no wish to take matters out of your hands, and I will undertake, on Mr. Penhampton's part, that he will be at your disposal whenever you wish to see him. Also, if he can furnish me with any explanation, I will undertake to pass it on to you."

"There's no getting away from the finger-prints, sir," persisted Pollard doggedly.

"No, no, possibly not," replied Sir Edric impatiently. "I quite appreciate the case you have established. But I repeat, that in my opinion, the interests of justice will best be served by leaving me to deal

with Mr. Penhampton for the moment. Damn it, man, he can't escape from the very heart of Scotland Yard!"

There was no alternative for Pollard but to go, which he did with a very bad grace. Sir Edric waited until the door had closed behind him, then turned once more to Dick.

"I don't know what the devil you've been up to," he said in a tone of irritation. "But it's perfectly plain to me that Pollard has convinced himself that you're either the Funny Toff himself or his chief lieutenant."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"It's going to be deuced awkward, one way and another," continued Sir Edric, without giving Dick time to recover from his amazement. "Pollard is a tenacious devil, and it will take a lot to dissuade him from his opinion. Look here, Dick, is this another of your amateur sleuth stunts?"

"My dear fellow," replied Dick. "I'm floundering helplessly in the dark. Pollard seems to have made up his mind that I went to Ibbotson's house last night. I assure you, on my word of honour, that I didn't, and I know that you'll believe me. But, even if I had done so, I fail to see whence all this storm arises."

"Well, the fact is that the place was entered last night, and the Maharajah's Rubies were taken," said Sir Edric quietly.

Dick whistled softly. "Oh, so that's the way the wind blows, is it!" he exclaimed. "And the worthy Pollard thinks that I'm the bold burglar. I had a suspicion the other day that he fancied I had murdered the wretched Herridge. But, I say, Conway, are you perfectly certain that the finger-prints on that door-knob are mine?"

"I'm afraid that there's very little doubt about it," replied Sir Edric. "And it's that which makes the whole business so awkward. It seems to me that it'll want a lot of explaining away."

"Well, unless I've taken to walking in my sleep, I can't explain it," said Dick candidly. "The ridiculous

thing is that I can't establish an alibi. As it happens, nobody that I know of saw me go into my rooms, and the mews was deserted when I put my car away. And then there's that curious business about the telegram."

"I don't, at the moment, see what that has to do with it," remarked Sir Edric dryly.

"But I think I do," replied Dick slowly. "Wait a minute, let me try to disentangle this mess. I can't help feeling that this is another move of our humorous friend, directed mainly, of course, against the rubies, but incidentally against me. He seems to have had a grudge against me ever since our interview, and now he's had the happy idea of enlisting the police on his side. By jove, Conway, he's a fellow worth pitting one's wits against!"

"So I have already discovered," remarked Sir Edric. "But I fail to understand how even his ingenuity could enable him to take your hand against your will and press it firmly upon the door-knob of Ibbotson's pantry."

"No, but what if he took Ibbotson's door-knob and pressed it against my hand?" replied Dick. "By jove, man, I believe I've got it! You remember my telling you of my adventure in that empty house in Creek Street? Well, one point about it strikes me very forcibly, now I come to think of it. The door of the room in which our friend had installed himself was shut, and I had to open it. When I caught hold of the handle I noticed that it was unpleasantly sticky. See the dodge? He had prepared it on purpose, so that it would take a good impression of my finger-prints. I expect that he had had designs on Ibbotson's safe for some time and had fitted the door of the room in Creek Street with a knob similar to that on Ibbotson's pantry.

Then, when I'd gone, he took off the knob and kept it by him until the Ibbotson coup came off. Mind you, I don't think he knew at the time who I was. He can't have discovered that until he circulated his flash-light photograph. It was just a precaution, in case I proved an unsatisfactory agent. If I had proved satisfactory, and obeyed orders, the door-knob would not have been substituted. In the alternative event, the police would have saved him the bother of getting rid of me."

"I shouldn't wonder if you were right," remarked Sir Edric, picking up the door-knob. "Now I look at this thing closely, it looks as though it had been covered with gum or varnish or something. If that were still wet when you put your hand on it, it would account for the perfection of the imprint. I'll send round to Wapping. If we can't find your finger-marks on the door of the room in Creek Street, your explanation is probably correct."

"I don't see any other solution," replied Dick. "It was a damned ingenious trick, you must admit. And look how I was recalled from Somersetshire, so as to be in London when the theft was carried out! Our friend, or one of his agents, sent that telegram, you may bet. And it's that that rather bothers me. As it happens, I told nobody but Alison my address. I didn't even let Jerry Gould know where I was going. Alison isn't likely to have told anybody, except perhaps her aunt or her father; there's no particular reason why she should. That means that our friend has got a man following me about. I wish to heaven I could catch him at it!"

"Perhaps we'll catch him for you," remarked Sir Edric. "I suppose your lock-up in the mews was broken into, after you had left the car there. If you're

right about the door-knob, it is easy to understand how the real thief would prefer to use your car. I think he deliberately waited for the policeman to pass before entering the house, and there was always the chance of the man noticing the number of the car and remembering it. Another useful piece of evidence against you, my boy! I'll send a man to have a look at that lock-up."

"I don't suppose that will tell you much," replied Dick. "Our friend has too keen an eye for detail to have broken in. He'll have provided himself with a key which would open it."

"I expect he will," agreed Sir Edric. "Taking it all round, Dick, it's going to be a devil of a job to persuade Pollard of your innocence. I can't very well order him to cease all inquiries in your direction. He would, quite rightly, consider it unwarrantable interference on my part. Besides, he'd think that I was in league with you, and I wouldn't put it past him to evolve the theory that I was the Funny Toff, and you were my trusted subordinate. You don't know these chaps like I do, Dick. They value a practical fact like that door-knob more than they do a dozen volumes of theory. Pollard will believe that you took the rubies until he sees definite ocular proof that you didn't. The most that I can do is to give him instructions that he is not to arrest you without my permission."

"Confound the man!" exclaimed Dick. "I suppose he'll shadow me till further orders. Well, it ought to prove amusing. It looks as though I were already being shadowed by the Funny Toff's people, since they seem to know wherever I go. But just think of the astute Pollard having had his suspicions of me so early! That was a pretty cute dodge of his, getting me to

draw a sketch of the necklace in his note-book! Of course, he got a beautiful impression of my fingerprints. And I thought he was merely rather a stupid man, going over ground which had already been covered, days before!"

"It seems a pity you didn't leave the matter to us in the first place," commented Sir Edric. "I admit that you are the only man we know who has succeeded in interviewing the Funny Toff, but, frankly, that doesn't seem to have carried us much further, while it has led to a devil of a lot of complications. Well, there's nothing more to be said now. You had better leave me to make what explanation I can to Pollard. By the way, before you go. Are you proposing to stay in London for the present? I ought, in fairness, to tell Pollard your plans."

"As a matter of fact, I didn't propose to stay in town," replied Dick. "When I rang Alison up last night, she suggested that since I had come up from Somersetshire, I might as well go down and stay at Lestridge Hall. However, if you would rather I remained on the spot, I can put that off."

Sir Edric hesitated. "No," he said at last, "I think, on the whole, that you had better go. You can't get into mischief there, at all events. I'll tell Pollard, and he can take what measures he thinks fit."

Dick returned to his rooms, his mind fully occupied with this new development. He felt convinced that his explanation had been correct, and that advantage had been taken of the theft of the rubies to afford him yet another warning. And, he reflected, a particularly unpleasant one. It was perfectly plain, that, had he not been a personal friend of the Assistant Commis-

sioner, he would have been arrested that morning. In view of the evidence which would have been produced by the police, he would have found it almost impossible to establish his innocence. He could produce no alibi, and his theory of the substituted door-knobs would have sounded much too far-fetched to be believed.

But what puzzled him most was why he had been favoured with these warnings. The Funny Toff had undoubtedly learnt that he had had the effrontery to try to pick up his trail. This, surely, was as serious a crime in his eyes as had been committed by Brooks or Herridge. Yet they had been murdered without the formality of any warning. It was not, as Dick realised with a thrill of apprehension, that the Funny Toff or his agents had lacked opportunity. They knew of his journey to the Mendips, as the telegram had proved. What could have been easier than to have murdered him on those desolate moors? Especially as he believed that they had been the scene of Brooks's murder!

The only possible reason was that he was not considered sufficiently dangerous to justify the risk incurred in killing him. It was not altogether a complimentary thought, but Dick, upon reflection, decided that advantage might be taken of it. He would leave London and bury himself in the country at Lestrige Hall, thus creating the impression that he abandoned the pursuit. But he could still use his brains, and communicate any theories which he might evolve to Sir Edric.

This would certainly be the safest plan. Dick was no coward, and would have enjoyed nothing better than to continue his struggle with the Funny Toff. But there were others beside himself to be thought of.

The next move on the part of his adversary might well be to strike at him through those he loved. His connection with Alison was already known, since they had used her name as a bait to recall him. At Lestridge Hall he would not only, as Sir Edric had put it, be out of mischief, but he would be enabled, in some degree at least, to watch over Alison's safety. He would go down next day, as he had promised her.

Having reached this conclusion, he rose and strolled across the room to the window. Walking up and down the opposite pavement was a powerful-looking man, attired in a blue overcoat and a bowler hat, who appeared to be engaged in counting the paving stones.

"Pollard's first move!" muttered Dick. "I wonder if it would be etiquette to ask that fellow in and offer him a drink?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

DICK was fascinated at first sight by Lestridge Hall. It was a square house of the Georgian period, standing in the midst of lawns over which stately trees presided. Beyond the lawns, and separated from them by sunken fences, stretched a small park, in which a herd of black and white Friesians grazed. Seen in the last rays of the westering sun, which shone upon the windows, lighting them up with crimson, as though they blazed with internal fire, Lestridge Hall was a pleasant and restful place.

So it seemed to Dick, as he and Alison drove up together from the station. He found it impossible to imagine even the existence of crime, or a criminal such as the Funny Toff had proved himself to be. His experiences of the last few weeks now seemed like a series of hideous nightmares, to be lost and forgotten under the influence of a peaceful day.

"Do you think you'll be able to find enough to amuse you here, Dick?" asked Alison suddenly. "It's very different from London, you know. We don't see many people; Father hates having people in the house, he says it disturbs him. And as he refuses to go out himself unless he's literally forced to, our society is rather limited. Still, there's some pretty decent hunting, and old William declares that the poachers have left us a pheasant or two."

"I shan't have any difficulty in amusing myself," replied Dick with a smile. "For one thing, I shall see

something of you, which I never could in London without a crowd of people hanging round. But, I say, are you sure that your father won't find me an infernal nuisance? I'll do my best to keep out of his way, but still——"

"Oh, you needn't worry!" exclaimed Alison. "It was Father himself who suggested your coming down. He doesn't mind having people if he's not expected to entertain them, and, in your case he seems to have made up his mind that that's my job. Besides, he likes you and I think, in his funny old way, he wants to make friends. I know that in a bewildered sort of way he imagines that once we're married you'll carry me off and he'll never see me again. He's got curious old-fashioned ideas about some things. Well, here we are."

They entered a fine old hall, from which a fine oak staircase led up to a surrounding gallery. Tea was already laid before a blazing wood fire, and at the sound of their arrival Dr. Weatherleigh appeared through a curtained door. He welcomed Dick warmly, and showed himself a surprisingly affable and considerate host. Dick had somehow fancied that, in his own house, the antiquary would have been wrapped up in his hobby, to the exclusion of everything else. But, as it happened, it was only towards the end of tea that the hobby was even mentioned.

"Alison tells me that you have been down in Somersetshire since we last met, Dick," remarked Dr. Weatherleigh. "It is not a part of England I know very well, my own preference is for the eastern counties, perhaps because I was born and have always lived in them. Whereabouts in Somersetshire did you stay?"

"In the heart of the Mendips," replied Dick. "I had intended to put in a couple of days with the hounds—I rather enjoy a stone-wall country for a change—but I was recalled sooner than I expected."

"The Mendips? Indeed!" exclaimed Dr. Weatherleigh with considerable interest. "That is one of the tracts which I have always promised myself to explore, some day. From the antiquarian point of view, the Mendips are of the greatest interest. The caves in that locality have yielded abundant traces of Palæolithic man, and, as you are possibly aware, lead has been worked there from the earliest times. Why, some years ago, a pig of lead was found near Charterhouse-on-Mendip, bearing an inscription of the first century A.D.!"

Alison hastened to interrupt what threatened to develop into a lecture on early inscriptions. "By the way, Dick, did you ever find anything about that telegram you rang me up about the other night?" she asked.

For an instant Dick hesitated. He had never mentioned to Alison the existence of the Funny Toff, and he had no intention of doing so now. Alison, misunderstanding his hesitation, laughed merrily. "It's all right," she assured him. "Father and I have no secrets from one another. At least, I haven't from him. He may from me, I've never pried into his lurid past. I told him about the telegram."

"It seems rather an extraordinary thing," remarked Dr. Weatherleigh. "But, like most extraordinary things, capable of simple explanation, no doubt."

The delay had given Dick time to think. "No, I never found out who sent it," he replied unconcernedly. "Some wag, no doubt. I expect he saw the announce-

ment of our engagement in the papers, and thought a practical joke of this kind a good way of celebrating it. No doubt, he'll be hugely delighted when he knows it succeeded."

"Well, we'll do our best to make up to you for the curtailment of your stay in Somersetshire," said Dr. Weatherleigh. "The place is at your disposal, and Alison will show you where to find what you want."

Dick soon learnt the routine of the house. Dr. Weatherleigh was an early riser, and was in the habit of going round the estate and giving his orders before breakfast. That meal disposed of, he disappeared into his study, a most comfortable room, surrounded by glass-fronted shelves full of priceless antiques, until the dressing gong rang, only emerging for lunch and tea. By then, he declared, his day's work was finished. After dinner he would drink a few glasses of vintage port, and then, for preference, adjourn to the billiard room, where both he and Alison proved themselves remarkably expert with a cue.

On the third day of Dick's stay at Lestridge Hall, Dr. Weatherleigh came down to dinner with a worried expression on his face, and was unusually silent during the meal. Alison said nothing until he had consumed his second glass of port. Then, when her father's expression had begun to re-assume its accustomed serenity, she asked her question. "What's the matter, Father? Out with it. Has one of your treasures turned out to be a forgery? One might expect anything after that Glozel affair."

Dr. Weatherleigh's features relaxed into a smile. "Nothing so serious as that, my dear," he replied. "Nothing at all, in fact, except that I am foolish enough to be annoyed by trifles. William came to see

me this evening, and told me that he thought I ought to know that the policeman has been hanging about the place for the last couple of days. William asked him for his reasons this afternoon, and the man merely said that those were his orders. I am very much afraid that there must be a suspicious character in the neighbourhood. I am always nervous about what Alison calls my treasures. Some of them are certainly valuable, but hardly so, one would imagine, to the ordinary thief."

Alison laughed. "Oh, if that's all, father dear, I don't think you need worry. After all, it's no great inconvenience to have a policeman about the place. But how fortunate that I managed to get engaged to Dick! Otherwise you'd be thinking that the policeman had replaced the postman in my youthful affections. I'm going into the billiard room to practise a few shots. Don't be too long, you two."

As soon as she had left the room, Dick turned to his host. "Look here, Doctor," he said, "I feel most apologetic about this policeman. I'm afraid that I am the cause of his hanging about the place."

Dr. Weatherleigh looked at him in amazement. "You, Dick!" he exclaimed. "Why, is anything wrong?"

"No, there's nothing wrong," replied Dick with a smile. "But I'm afraid that, in the eyes of the law, I'm a suspicious person."

"Really, Dick," said Dr. Weatherleigh in amazement. "But in what way can such a situation have come about?"

"I'll tell you the whole story if you wish," said Dick after a pause, "but it's all such a muddle that, if you don't mind, I'd almost rather wait until I see daylight.

Perhaps I've taken too much upon myself—I seem to have made a mess all round—” He was silent. Dr. Weatherleigh said nothing. In sudden panic, Dick shot out: “I say, you don't think I am hiding anything—disgraceful, do you? I mean, I'm asking you to trust me, I know, and——”

Dr. Weatherleigh came up to him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Dick,” he said, “I may seem an old man wrapped up in his hobby, but I assure you I am seldom wrong in my judgment of a man. You don't have to tell me anything. Whatever happens, however odd a position you find yourself in, never be afraid that I shall doubt you. And I am sure Alison won't either.”

“Thank you,” said Dick, deeply moved. “Well, if you'd like it in tabloid form, I am suspected by one Inspector Pollard of the C.I.D. of pinching the Maharajah's rubies from that fellow Ibbotson—you've seen the burglary in the papers?” Dr. Weatherleigh nodded. “I know you won't let what I say go any further than this room,” Dick went on, and gave a rough outline of what had happened from the time of his visit to the Margate Jetty to his last interview with the Assistant Commissioner.

“Well,” said Dr. Weatherleigh at the end of the recital, “all I can say is that you have certainly been living in a world of alarms and it's a good thing you're well out of trouble down here. Please stay as long as you feel inclined, but remember, too, that we shall both of us understand if you feel the need to get back into the danger zone. We shall ask no questions, but simply pray that you may come through safe and sound.”

Alison came impatiently into the room.

"I thought you were never coming," she complained, "and here you sit looking as solemn as owls. So jolly for me!"

"Deal gently with us, my dear," her father pleaded. They followed her to the billiard room, where Dr. Weatherleigh proceeded to deal most ungently with his daughter as his opponent!

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

FOR the next ten days Dick led a peaceful and uneventful life at LestrIDGE Hall, hunting or shooting during the day-time, and spending very comfortable evenings in the company of Dr. Weatherleigh and his daughter. The policeman still hovered in the background, and his presence had become a standing joke between Dick and his host. It was evident that Pollard's suspicions were not yet allayed.

Then, one evening, just after Dick had returned from a not unprofitable afternoon with his gun, an expedition upon which Alison had accompanied him, a telegram arrived, addressed to him. He tore it open with a feeling of annoyance, resentful of anything that should encroach upon the even tenor of his life. "Should be glad if you would come and see me as soon as possible, Conway," he read.

Alison was upstairs changing, and Dick, after a moment's hesitation, decided to seek Dr. Weatherleigh's advice. He entered his study, to find his host busily engaged in writing letters, which he immediately put aside on Dick's entrance. "Well, Dick, my boy, have you had a good day?" he asked cheerfully.

"Not at all bad, until now," replied Dick. "But I've just had a wire from Conway, the Assistant Commissioner. I'd like you to have a look at it, Doctor."

He handed the telegram to Dr. Weatherleigh, who frowned as he read it. "Under the circumstances, I

am afraid that you have no option but to comply," he said. "I trust that it does not imply some fresh complication in that ridiculous matter of the rubies. I suppose, by the way, that there is no doubt that the telegram is genuine? You have been recalled to London before on false pretences, I seem to remember."

"I'll ring up Conway and make sure," replied Dick. "He's always in his office at this time."

Dick put his call through, and returned to the study. "It's genuine enough," he reported. "Conway says that he wants to see me most particularly. I told him that I would catch the first train to-morrow morning."

"Well, there is no help for it," said Dr. Weatherleigh with a sigh. "We must resign ourselves to losing you for the moment, but you will come back here as soon as your business with the Assistant Commissioner is completed?"

"I will come back as soon as I can, Dr. Weatherleigh," Dick replied. "I shall have to spend a night or two in London, as I have a few matters of business which must be attended to. But I assure you that I will return to Lestridge Hall as soon as I can."

Dick travelled up to London next day. He was fully determined that he would not again commit the error of undertaking any independent investigation. He had failed rather conspicuously once already, and there seemed no reason to suppose that he would be successful at a second attempt.

He entered Sir Edric's room with a smile, and sat down in a chair beside the Assistant Commissioner's desk. Sir Edric looked tired and worried, but greeted Dick with his accustomed cheerfulness. "It's very good of you to come up so promptly, Dick," he said.

"I hated to call you away, but I think it possible that you may be able to help me."

"I gather that I am not to be arrested for the theft of the Maharajah's jewels?" replied Dick with a smile.

"No, you seem to be cleared on that charge," said Sir Edric. "Your theory of the door-knob seems to be correct. We failed to find your finger-marks in the house on Creek Street, and the experts have come to the conclusion that the impression on the door-knob was made some days before Pollard found it. Even he is prepared to admit your innocence, rather reluctantly, though, I'm afraid. What weighs most with him is that another crime has been committed, while you were safely at Lestridge Hall."

"He took good care that I shouldn't leave there without his knowledge," commented Dick. "Dr. Weatherleigh was quite disturbed at the continued presence of the village policeman. But what's this new crime? Has our old friend the Funny Toff been exercising the brains of the police once more?"

"He has, and that is what I wanted to talk to you about," replied Sir Edric. "I'll describe his latest exploit to you, as far as we know it at present. In the first place, do you know Hatton Garden? It is a street running northwards from Holborn Circus, at the corner of Gamages, roughly parallel to the Farringdon Road."

"I think I've been there once," said Dick. "It didn't strike me as being a particularly enlivening thoroughfare."

"It isn't," agreed Sir Edric. "I spent yesterday morning there, and I know. It is, however, as you

probably know, the home of wholesale jewellers, diamond merchants, and people like that. Amongst these are Seccombe and Armitage, a firm of diamond merchants, whose premises are at the corner of Hatton Garden and Ely Street, on the left-hand side as you go up.

"Now, next door to this place, in Ely Street, is a rather ramshackle sort of building, with a yard behind it. This building has been divided up. The ground floor is a tobacconist's shop, and the three upper floors are used as work-rooms by different people. The yard, which is reached through a gateway leading on to Ely Street, is barely more than fifty feet square, and is surrounded by high walls, one of which is the back wall of Seccombe & Armitage's place. Do you follow the lay out of the place?"

"Sufficiently well, I think," replied Dick. "What is the yard used for?"

"I'm coming to that. Before the tobacconist took the ground floor, it was occupied by a grocer, who used the yard to keep a couple of vans in. After he left, the yard was disused for some years. It isn't big enough to be of much use to anybody. But, about six months ago, the owners of the building were approached by a concern calling themselves the All-England Haulage Company. These people explained that they had a contract, which would last for a year, and which involved their garaging a lorry in that part of London. The yard would suit them very well for this purpose, provided that they were allowed to put up a corrugated iron shelter on one side of it, and to dig an inspection pit, to allow of access to the underneath of the lorry. They offered a tempting rent for a year, to be paid in advance. After some bargaining, their offer

was accepted, and, since the rent was paid at once, no inquiries were made as to the status of the company.

"The shelter and pit were duly completed, and the lorry commenced to use the yard. It was fairly regular in its movements. Usually the driver came for it about eight o'clock in the morning, drove it away, and returned about six at night. Sometimes, however, it would not go out, or, having returned, would remain in the garage for a day or two. It was an ordinary open lorry, but it usually had a tarpaulin cover over it.

"So much for the yard and the lorry. Now we come to Seccombe & Armitage's place, which is a fairly new building. Seccombe & Armitage occupy the ground floor and basement only; the upper floors are let off as offices. The ground floor is used for ordinary business purposes, showrooms and so forth. Half of the basement has been converted into a strong-room, lined with steel, and with a door which would defy a charge of dynamite. In the strong-room are a number of safes of various sizes, in which different varieties of stones are kept. A night watchman is employed in the building, who patrols the basement and ground floor at intervals, without, of course, actually entering the strong-room, to which only Mr. Armitage, the head of the firm, has the key.

"Yesterday morning, the lorry drove out of the yard as usual, a little before eight. Mr. Armitage arrived in his office soon after half-past nine, and a little before ten went down to the strong-room to fetch a parcel of stones. When he had opened the door, he was confronted with a gaping hole in the side of the strong-room, and found that two of the safes, weighing about half a ton each, and containing stones worth many thousands of pounds, had completely vanished.

"We were informed at once, and Pollard went to investigate. The hole in the wall was about five feet square. The brickwork of the wall had been cut away, brick by brick, and the steel had been cut through with an oxy-acetylene flame. He went through the hole, and found himself in a sort of cavern, at the bottom of which lay the pieces of steel which had been cut out. The roof of the cavern consisted of wooden planks. He removed these, climbed out, and found himself in the yard."

"By jove, that shows the hand of the Funny Toff clearly enough!" exclaimed Dick. "So well thought out, and yet so simple. Of course the lorry brought in a gang of men every evening, hidden beneath the tarpaulin. By night, they excavated the inspection pit, until they reached the wall of the basement, the earth being carried away by the lorry in the morning. Then they attacked the brick-work, and finally, when they were all ready, they cut out the steel work with their flame. Nobody could possibly see them, with the cover on the inspection pit, and probably the lorry standing over it as well."

"Yes, that's about how they set to work," agreed Sir Edric. "I went down and had a look at the place. They must have rolled the safes out through the opening, and then hoisted them out of the pit into the lorry. You can see where they fixed a tackle to one of the beams supporting the shelter. Oh, it was all carefully thought out, right enough!"

"You're after the lorry, I suppose?" suggested Dick. "I expect you know its number? And what about the two safes? They'll have to take them somewhere where they can be broken open."

"Pollard has that in hand now," replied Sir Edric.

"We've got the number of the lorry all right, LC7280. We rang up the County Council, and found out that the owners of those numbers were the All-England Haulage Company, of 57 Ely Street. That is the address of the tobacconist. The driver of the lorry had made arrangements with him to call for any letters addressed there to the company. I need hardly say that no such company exists."

Sir Edric paused. "There's just one clue," he continued after a short interval. "A month or two ago, a water-main happened to burst at the corner of Hatton Garden and Ely Street. It caused a bit of a flood before the water could be turned off, and one of the news agencies sent a man to take a photograph of it. The tobacconist, who was standing at the door of his shop, saw the photographer, and subsequently bought a copy of the photograph from the news agency. It shows him standing there, and he's so proud of it that he has hung it in his shop."

"Very enterprising of him," commented Dick. "But I don't see that it's much of a clue."

"Wait a bit," replied Sir Edric. "At the very moment that the photograph was taken, the lorry was coming out of the yard. The driver apparently did not notice the photographer; he was looking over the side of the lorry to see that it cleared the gateway. The result is, that we have an excellent picture of the front of the lorry, and of the profile of the driver."

"Heaven showers its mercies, even on the police, it seems," remarked Dick. "I don't know that it will help you much with the lorry. One lorry is very much like another, you know, especially if they are of well-known makes. And as for the driver, well, I expect he'll make himself scarce for a bit."

"Yes, I know all that," replied Sir Edric impatiently. "I've learnt at least the elements of common sense since I've been sitting in this chair. But I'm pretty sure that the Funny Toff arranged this show, and that therefore the driver is one of his regular agents. I don't want to make inquiries in Wapping, for the Funny Toff will almost certainly get to hear of it if I do. If he thought that the driver had been recognised, he would either hide him where we shouldn't find him, or knock him on the head, whichever he found most convenient. In either case, we shouldn't be any forrader. But there's just a chance that you may have run across him during your visits to that salubrious neighbourhood. Here's the photograph. Have a look at him."

Dick took the photograph and studied it intently. "Yes, I know him," he said quietly. "As a matter of fact, I owe him a drink. He stood me a double gin in the Margate Jetty that evening."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"GOOD man!" exclaimed Sir Edric. "It was a pretty long shot, sending for you like that, but it came off, after all. That establishes one thing, at least, that the robbery was carried out by the gang you got in touch with. Since they put you in touch with the Funny Toff, it is almost certain that he was at the bottom of it. If we can only trace the lorry and the driver, we shall be on his tracks."

"Yes," replied Dick doubtfully. "That's true enough as far as it goes, but, from our experience of the Funny Toff, it's pretty safe to guess that he has taken precautions against the lorry or the man being traced. I shouldn't wonder if the next thing you found wasn't the wretched man's body. He seems to have a short way with anybody who's likely to give him away. Besides, time's getting on. This happened yesterday morning, you tell me?"

"I know," agreed Sir Edric. "I am hoping every moment that we may hear something."

"There is nothing to prevent your hoping, I suppose," remarked Dick. "But I tell you what, Conway: I'm immensely interested in that lorry. It's all Lombard Street to a China orange that it is the one from which Inspector Brooks's body was thrown out. I don't suppose that the Funny Toff keeps a fleet of them."

"I expect that you're right," replied Sir Edric. "But I don't see that that helps us much. The con-

stable at Brentbridge said that he wouldn't recognise the lorry that passed him. He was too much dazzled by its headlights to get a good look at it. We don't know where the Brentbridge lorry came from, nor where it went to."

"It's a pretty safe guess that it changed its number somewhere on the road, and went to Ely Street, where its driver locked it up all safe and comfy," said Dick. "As to where it came from, that's a different matter. But at the moment, as I quite realise, the interesting question is where it is now."

He lay back in his chair, and sat for a few moments gazing at the ceiling and whistling softly. Sir Edric bore it for as long as he could. And then at last: "I wish to heaven you'd stop that noise, Dick," he said irritably. "If you've nothing further to suggest, you can clear out. I'm busy."

"That's your trouble, Conway," replied Dick agreeably. "You and all your underlings are always too busy to think. Pass me that Whitaker's Almanack on your desk, will you?"

Sir Edric handed it to him, and he turned over the leaves until he found the information which he sought. Then, with an ingratiating smile, he turned once more to Sir Edric. "Look here," he said, "you dragged me up to town, and now, if you want to get rid of me, you'll have to pay for the privilege. I feel like a little motoring this afternoon. Have you got a car, a very obvious police car, with a comparatively intelligent driver, that you can put at my disposal?"

"What the deuce do you mean?" asked Sir Edric. "Do you suppose that the Government maintain expensive cars for the disreputable acquaintances of Assistant Commissioners of Police to go joy-riding in?"

"I don't want to go joy-riding," replied Dick. "If I did I'd take my own car, which your minions so thoughtfully kept an eye on in St. James's Square the other morning. It's a better bus than anything you've got, but unfortunately it seems a bit too familiar to the Funny Toff. The fact is, I've got an idea, and I'd just love to score one up on Pollard."

"Very well," said Sir Edric hesitatingly. "I suppose you can have a car. But none of your Sherlock Holmes stunts, mind."

"I give you my word that I am only going to look for something, which I probably shan't find," replied Dick. "If I do find it, I won't touch it, but I'll come straight back and let you know. Now I'm going out to get some lunch. I'll be back soon after two, if you will have the car waiting for me."

As Dick lunched it seemed to him that his idea was remarkably far-fetched. Yet, while the Assistant Commissioner had been talking to him, he had tried to put himself in the place of the brain that had organised the robbery. The lorry was bound to leave, with the safes loaded upon it, and the men who had carried out the coup hidden under the tarpaulin, at its usual hour, if it was to escape attention. Now, what would the next move be? The natural tendency of a man responsible for such an incriminating cargo would be to dispose of it as soon as possible. But there were difficulties attaching to this course. How and where were the safes to be unloaded in broad daylight, for instance?

Then again, the lorry ran no risk of being stopped for some hours after it left the yard. The robbery had not been discovered until after ten; some time must have elapsed before Pollard reached Hatton

Garden and established how the safes had been removed; still more time must have been lost before the description of the lorry had been obtained and circulated. It must have been early in the afternoon, at the earliest, before the police generally had been warned to look out for the lorry. The only really dangerous hours, from the point of view of the driver, would be those between say two o'clock and dark.

With ordinary precautions, such as change of number-plates, it should have been easy for the lorry to escape notice until nightfall. Then, under cover of darkness, the safes could be unloaded at some spot where they could be broken open. Such a spot would have to be unfrequented, for by the time unloading could take place, a careful watch would be kept for a lorry unloading safes. There was also the problem of the empty safes to be considered. They were a potential danger so long as they remained where they might be found. The chosen spot, then, must have facilities for the disposal of something like a ton of metal.

Surely the ruined cottage at Coldharbour Point was the very place. The Funny Toff had made use of it before, and, although it had achieved a fleeting notoriety from the discovery of Herridge's body, that incident had been forgotten, and it had reverted to its usual desolation. It would be an excellent place in which to break up the safes, out of sight and hearing of the rest of the world. And the mud below the ruined wharf would swallow up many tons of metal, without showing a trace.

It was for the purpose of visiting this spot that Dick had asked Sir Edric for the loan of a car. He would have driven down to Rainham in his own, but that he

felt that there was grave danger of it being recognised. He had no desire to let the Funny Toff know that he was again taking part in the campaign against him. His idea was merely to visit the place, and ascertain whether any traces remained of the unloading of the safes. He would take no action, but merely return to Scotland Yard and report.

Dick finished his lunch, and went back to Sir Edric's office. A car was ready for him, and he gave the driver instructions to take him along the Embankment to Blackfriars. He did not want to announce his destination while in the precincts of the Yard, lest his idea, for which he wished to reserve the credit to himself, should be guessed. He felt that Inspector Pollard regarded him with a certain not unjustifiable contempt, and he dearly longed to show him that the amateur brain was capable of thinking of something that had not occurred to the official mind.

Once at Blackfriars, he told the driver that he wished to go to Rainham. The man grinned. It was he who had driven the party down to inspect Heridge's body. "Going to have another look at that there ruined cottage, sir?" he ventured.

"I am, and I am going to take you with me," replied Dick cheerfully. "I've got an idea we might find something interesting there."

"I don't know as we can get the car down that lane from the station, sir," said the man. "We'll have a try, though, if you like."

"No, we'll leave the car at the police station, like as we did before, and walk," replied Dick. "There may be tracks in the lane, and I shouldn't like to obscure them."

The two men walked down the track towards Cold-

harbour Point. For the first mile or two it was hard and dry, and no traces such as Dick hoped to see were visible upon its surface. But after that it degenerated into a mere cart-track across the marshes. It was not very long before ruts became apparent, evidently of quite recent origin.

"It looks as if somebody had been along here lately, sir," observed the car driver.

"It does indeed," agreed Dick. "What do you make of those wheel tracks?"

The man walked slowly along them for some moments without replying. "There's been a lorry along here, sir," he said at last. "Solid tyres, single on the front, twin on the back. Looks as if it had been over the ground twice, sir. Probably it went down to the river and came back again."

"Then I think that our journey has not been wasted," remarked Dick in a tone of satisfaction. "Come on, let's see if we can find out where it stopped."

They followed the tracks down to the sea-wall. There, where the road widened out, were signs of the lorry having been turned. But here again the surface was comparatively hard, and there were no traces of foot-marks. They examined the ground carefully, then struck off towards the ruined cottage.

Here everything was as Dick so vividly remembered it. The doors and windows stood gaping, the general air of ruin and desolation was not alleviated by the slightest sign of human habitation. They went over the place thoroughly, peering into every corner, but there was no sign that any one had been near the place since the removal of Herridge's body.

"That's queer," muttered Dick. "You can't play

about with a couple of safes, weighing half a ton each, without leaving some sort of traces behind you. Yet, if they opened the safes down here, they must have done it in the cottage. They would never dare use an oxy-acetylene flame in the open; the whole countryside would have seen the glare. Yet what would they bring them here for, if not to open them?"

"Let's go and have a look at the wharf," he said abruptly. They retraced their steps, and Dick peered over the wall at the mud beneath. The tide was rising, as he expected. He had looked up the time of high-water when he had borrowed Sir Edric's Whitaker, and found that it would be at seven o'clock. The edge of the mud was still uncovered, but Dick searched its surface vainly for any signs of the vanished safes.

He strolled on towards the broken-down wharf, and then, with an exclamation of surprise, quickened his steps. The edge of one of the timbers showed a long scar, as though something sharp and heavy had been pushed across it. The scar had evidently been made quite recently: torn splinters of wood were scattered round it. And then, suddenly, the events of the previous evening became perfectly clear to him. He wondered at his own folly in not guessing it before.

Dick turned to the car-driver. "Come on," he said. "Let's get back to the Yard as quickly as possible. The fellows we are after have got a long start of us, as it is."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE car raced back to Scotland Yard, and Dick, pleading urgency, was immediately shown into Sir Edric's room. He glanced at the clock as he entered. It was twenty minutes past five.

"Hullo Dick, back already from your joy-ride?" remarked Sir Edric. "We've had a stroke of luck since you've been out. We've found the lorry."

"Have you?" replied Dick. "I rather thought you might. Where did you find it?"

"Near Long Melford, in Suffolk," said Sir Edric. "A policeman going his rounds found it abandoned by the roadside in a country lane, about four o'clock this morning, with the radiator still warm. He reported it, of course, but it wasn't till this afternoon that the Suffolk police circulated our description, and the significance of the find was realised. They got on the 'phone to us, and Pollard went down there straight away."

Dick strolled over to a map of England that hung upon the wall, a ruler in his hand. He laid the ruler on the map, then measured it against the scale. "Fifty miles as the crow flies, say seventy or eighty by road, avoiding the main routes," he murmured. "Taking things very easily, he would have got there about two o'clock this morning. The driver is at this moment having his tea comfortably by his own fireside in London, somewhere. Poor old Pollard! I hope there's a decent pub somewhere in Long Melford."

"What on earth are you talking about?" exclaimed Sir Edric. "Of course the lorry got there about one or two, the radiator being still warm tells us that, and I'm quite prepared to accept your estimate of the distance of Long Melford from London. But what I want to know is, what was it doing all day yesterday?"

"Driving about with the safes neatly loaded upon it, under the eyes of your perspicuous policemen, I fancy," replied Dick easily. "And I wasn't measuring the distance from Long Melford to London exactly. But I'm sorry to say, Conway, that Messrs. Seccombe & Armitage will never see their safes, or what remains of them, any more."

"Why not?" inquired Sir Edric sharply. "I must say, Dick, you have a damned irritating way of propounding your ridiculous theories."

"Because they are somewhere at the bottom of the North Sea or German Ocean," replied Dick imperturbably. "Look here, where would be the best place to dispose of those stones?"

"Amsterdam, probably," said Sir Edric. "We have already warned the Dutch authorities to be on the look out for them."

"Bit late in the day," remarked Dick, shaking his head. "From Coldharbour Point to some nice quiet spot on the Dutch Coast would be about a hundred and fifty nautical miles. At ten knots—and that's the lowest speed one can allow for a sea-going motor-boat in calm weather like this—that distance would be covered in fifteen hours. I fancy that the stones were safe in Holland by eleven o'clock this morning."

"Of course, I've the greatest admiration for your powers of deduction," said Sir Edric sarcastically.

"But suppose you sit down and tell me how you arrived at that conclusion."

"Well, I took your imposing but not very comfortable car for a little run to the messuage or tenement which the Funny Toff selected as a mortuary," replied Dick. "There I found the tracks of a lorry. I don't say for certain that was *the* lorry, for I'm not sufficiently expert as a sleuth to identify individual lorries by their tyre marks, but it seems fairly likely. There's a decayed sort of wharf, close by, which looks very much as though the safes had been hauled or rolled across it. Now comes the deduction. We have already, you will remember, deduced the existence of a motor-boat of sorts. Now it was high water yesterday evening at about half-past six. At that time the motor-boat could have lain alongside the wharf. I suggest that, in fact, she did so, and that the cases were loaded on to her. If she was big enough to carry them, she was certainly big enough to cross the North Sea in fine weather.

"Look how neatly that disposes of the difficulty of opening the cases. Once out of sight of land, her crew could get busy with their oxy-acetylene flames without the slightest fear of attracting attention. Once they were open, and the stones removed, all that remained to be done was to pitch them overboard. I think you'll agree that I was right when I said that they would never be seen again. As for the lorry, the energetic Pollard is wasting his time, I fancy. It had done its job as soon as the safes were unloaded. It was driven to your romantic Suffolk lane and abandoned, mainly as a convenient way of getting rid of it, but, incidentally, with the idea of drawing a red herring across the trail."

For some moments Sir Edric made no reply. "Your imagination seems as brisk as ever, Dick," he said at last. "I don't deny that your theory is possible, even probable, but it seems to me that there are precious few facts to support it. Of course I'll make inquiries all along the riverside, and I'll have a sharp watch kept on every motor-boat, or small steamer for that matter, entering the port, for I take it that they'll come back some time. I confess that I'm glad I brought you back to London."

"Since you dragged me back, I'm going to stay for a few nights," remarked Dick. "If I've earned a good mark this afternoon, may I be rewarded with an opportunity of indulging my idle curiosity? I'd like to have a look at that place in Hatton Garden to-morrow morning. I'd say this evening, but it's already too dark to see properly."

"Yes, I suppose you can go along if you want to," replied Sir Edric. "The place is full of policemen; you'd better take one of my cards, and they'll let you in. Pollard's in Suffolk, as I told you, so there's no fear of your being arrested at sight."

Armed with this introduction, Dick presented himself on the following morning to the sergeant in charge of the rifled premises. His first action was to inspect the strong-room in the basement, from which the remaining safes had been removed to a place of greater security. The steel wall had been cut through as with a knife, leaving a yawning gap through which the yellow clay of the excavations could be seen. He walked through into this, and made his way to the surface of the yard by means of a ladder which had been lowered into the pit.

It was the yard which particularly interested him.

Against the back wall of Seccombe & Armitage's premises a corrugated iron shelter had been erected, supported by pillars and girders much heavier than was necessary merely to support the roof. The real use of these girders was apparent, for the middle one was immediately over the pit, and had evidently been used for the purpose of attaching a hoisting tackle. Dick, standing under the shelter, noticed that it was so contrived that it screened the pit from the observation of all the windows looking over the yard.

The pit itself had been covered with heavy planks, of the type usually employed in inspection pits, for the shape of the yard and the position of the gateway made it necessary to run the wheels of the lorry over the pit in order to manœuvre it under the shelter. These plans had been removed, and piled in a heap. Dick glanced at them, but they were covered with oil and grease, which rendered them useless for his purpose.

However, the yard was paved with rough cobblestones, and looked a little more promising. Beginning with the part of it immediately within the gateway, he proceeded to get on to his hands and knees, and to peer about through his lens among the interstices between the stones. The constable stationed in the yard watched him for some seconds with ill-concealed amusement. He then strolled off towards the pit, and disappeared. A few seconds later, Dick, turning round, became aware of a row of grinning faces regarding him over the edge.

"Famous detective in characteristic attitude," he muttered. "Well, I don't care, let them laugh. I must say, though, I'm rather glad that Pollard isn't here to see. Hullo, what's this?"

He picked up a few grains of dried mud, and laid them in the palm of his hand, examining them intently through his magnifying glass. Having done so, he uttered an exclamation of satisfaction. "Good enough," he exclaimed softly. "That's what I was looking for. Now, the point is, what are we going to do about it?"

The fact that he had found a particle of galena between the stones of the yard added one more link to the chain of evidence that this particular lorry had been the one which had conveyed Brooks's body from the Mendips. If that were the case, then it was highly probable that a very close connection existed between the All-England Haulage Company and the High Mendip Mining Syndicate. He had not mentioned the existence of the latter firm to Sir Edric; he had, indeed said nothing to him of his exploits at the Anchor and Hope, fearing to be overwhelmed by a flood of sarcasm. Should he return to Scotland Yard and reveal his suspicions?

On the whole there seemed very little point in doing so. From his experiences of the methods of the Funny Toff Dick knew that it was in the last degree improbable that he would have left any traces behind him at the deserted workings. Privately, Dick believed that no more would be heard of the Funny Toff, at least for some years to come. His theory was that this last coup marked the end of his operations. He and all his gang had probably embarked on board the motor-boat, which they would scuttle at sea, landing at some secluded spot on the coast in small boats. After all, putting aside their earlier successes, the proceeds of the last three coups would yield a colossal sum, if judiciously realised. Or, more probably, the Funny

Toff would remain in England, unknown and unsuspected, while the gang dispersed.

The abandonment of the lorry seemed to lend colour to this theory. It looked like the last act in the carefully-staged drama: the flinging away of properties no longer required. If this were the case, then these audacious robberies would cease, and the menace of the Funny Toff would be removed, since, even though he himself had remained in England, he could scarcely act without his agents.

The more he considered the matter, the more firmly he became convinced that this was the end which the Funny Toff had planned. However careful he might be, every fresh attempt added to the danger of his discovery. Now that he had amassed wealth which must run into hundreds of thousands, surely he would be satisfied, and seek his own safety. It was practically certain that there was nothing more to be feared from the Funny Toff.

"Dash it! Now that the gang's bolted, I'm damned if I don't go and have another look at that old mine," he said to himself.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

DICK, having come to this decision, acted upon it without delay. He went straight to Paddington, where he sent a telegram to the landlord of the Anchor and Hope, asking him to meet him at Wells. He then made inquiries about trains, and found that he had just time to catch the 12.30, which would land him at Wells shortly before four.

He had taken the train, not only because it was quicker, but because he had his suspicions of Inspector Pollard and his ways. It was more than likely that Pollard had ordered a watch to be kept on the mews in which his car was garaged, and he had no desire to call the attention of Scotland Yard to his movements. If by any chance there was anything to be found in the disused workings, he wanted to find it alone. He had already scored once by his visit to Coldharbour Point, and his success had emboldened him to try to score again.

On the way down, he amused himself by trying to impart substance to the shadow known as the Funny Toff. Beyond the fact that he had a most creepy and disturbing laugh, he knew nothing of him. That he was a man who regarded crime as an art, there could be no doubt. In all probability, his agents were as ignorant of his real identity as Dick was himself. He imagined him as conducting his operations, hidden, metaphorically as well as actually, behind a screen. On the surface, he probably lived a blameless life,

probably in London. It was quite possible that Dick had met him often enough. He might even be a member of his own club. Now that he came to think of it, there were many people among his wide circle of acquaintances whose sources of income were a bit mysterious.

He passed them in review idly through his mind, until he came to the name of Ibbotson. There he paused, struck with a sudden idea. Ibbotson seemed to possess unbounded wealth, beyond even what might have been expected of a retired moneylender. Suppose the money-lending had been merely a preparation for an even more lucrative career. As a moneylender he would acquire a store of very valuable knowledge as to the possessions of his clients and their friends. In that capacity he might also have practised as a fence, thereby getting in touch with the members of the criminal classes.

Could Ibbotson and the Funny Toff be one and the same man? Now that Dick came to think of it, there was no reason against this supposition. He had not recognised the voice which had spoken to him in the house in Creek Street, but he had guessed at the time that the voice was probably assumed. There had been something unnatural about it, as though the speaker had adopted different tones from those he normally used. And as to the laugh, he never remembered having heard Ibbotson laugh. Perhaps he reserved that expression of amusement for his dealings with his agents. That they knew it was pretty obvious from the name by which they referred to him. Funny because he laughed, Toff because his speech was that of an educated man. The laugh itself was enough to inspire anybody with dread of the name. How did this

theory fit in with the robbery at 321 Park Lane? Almost exactly, Dick decided. It would be a very natural move on the part of the Funny Toff to stage such a drama, in order to divert any possible suspicion from himself. He could have dropped his keys at the Eros Club purposely. The story of the telephone message he could have invented himself. The mock robbery itself would be simple enough. It merely required two agents. One, the man dressed as a chauffeur, to steal Dick's car, and drive it to the door. The other, perhaps one of his own sons, to enter the house, provided with Ibbotson's own keys, and remove the rubies. There was only the smallest degree of risk attached to the whole operation. The man dressed as a chauffeur, who was probably the lorry-driver, had probably been ignorant of the identity of the man he drove, or of the fact that he was assisting to burgle his own employer's house.

By the time the train arrived at Wells, Dick had convinced himself of the correctness of his theory. He had no intention of staying more than one night at the Anchor and Hope, and he determined to confide his suspicions to Sir Edric immediately on his return to London. Whether Scotland Yard would ever succeed in collecting enough evidence to prosecute on any of the many charges lying to the score of the Funny Toff seemed doubtful. Dick realised that his inspiration had come to him rather too late. By now the members of the gang were dispersed, beyond a doubt, and the Funny Toff was not a man to leave incriminating evidence lying about. But suppose, by some extraordinary stroke of luck, Dick were able to find some clue connecting Ibbotson with the murder of Inspector Brooks!

Dick found the landlord of the Anchor and Hope waiting for him at the station. "Glad to see you again, sir," he said warmly. "I've got the trap outside, with the young horse in it. Perhaps you'd like to drive, sir? He's a bit skittish."

Dick took the reins, and the young horse started off at a spanking pace out of the town. The long climb up the slopes of the Mendips curbed his ardour slightly, and they reached the inn without mishap.

"We've put you in the same room as you had before, sir," remarked the landlord. "I'm sure you'll find it comfortable."

"I'm sure I shall," replied Dick. "Unfortunately I can't stay very long this time. I'll get you to drive me in to Wells to catch the 4.10 to-morrow evening. But I hope to come down again later on, and make rather a longer stay."

As soon as the bar opened, Dick took up his position by the fire, hoping that the old man whom he had seen on his previous visit might come in. He was not disappointed, and the two were soon engaged in a desultory conversation.

"Last time I was here, I rode over and had a look at those workings out Nordrach way, that you told me about," Dick remarked after a while. "There doesn't seem to be much doing there, from what I can see."

"No, sir, them London chaps have given up, by the looks of it," replied the old man. "Young Andrew Pierce, him that works for the Council on the roads, was telling me a night or two back that he thought they'd taken their gear away."

"What made him think that?" Dick asked. "Have any of them been down to the place lately?"

"I couldn't say that for sure," the old man replied

cautiously. "But Andrew saw a lorry coming from there, one morning a few weeks back. Andrew says it had a cover over it, like as if it was loaded up. As soon as I hears it, I reckons they've given the place up as a bad job, and were taking away everything that would fetch a bit of money. Anybody could have told them that they were only chucking away good money on a place like that. 'Tisn't likely that the workings would be shut down while there was any ore left."

But the latter part of the old man's speech was lost on Dick. Surely this bore out what he had suspected when he identified the fragments of mud in the packing-case! The lorry observed by Andrew had doubtless been carrying the body of Inspector Brooks. Andrew Pierce. He made a mental note of the name. Perhaps he would be able to remember the date on which he saw the lorry. He might even have caught sight of the driver, and be able to recognise him from the photograph found in the tobacconist's shop. A chain of evidence might thus be forged, link by link. Could it, Dick wondered, ever be stretched as far as Park Lane?

Next morning Dick breakfasted early, and announced to the landlord his intention of walking across the moors until it was time to return and catch his train. He meant to explore the disused workings, even though he had to climb over the wall in order to do so. A horse would be a useless encumbrance; he would have to be left outside, and might possibly reveal his presence.

The sky was dark and lowering when he set out, in marked contrast to the brightness of the previous days. During the night the wind had risen, and was now blowing in great gusts from the south-west, as though

trying to drive him from his path. The infrequent clumps of trees bowed before it, their wildly-waving branches semaphoring strange messages against the horizon. And the clouds, piling tier upon tier, threatened to burst in a downpour should the fury of the wind abate.

Dick rather welcomed the gale. It was exhilarating to battle with it, to keep one's course in spite of all its efforts. He was a rapid walker, and he covered the five or six miles from the inn to the deserted workings in under an hour and a half. He did not walk directly up to them, but climbed the hill behind, surveying the country through his field-glasses. Not a soul was in sight.

He came boldly down the hill, and walked up to the gate of the yard. In spite of the general air of neglect which hung over the place, the gate was thoroughly sound, and was secured by a massive padlock. Dick shook his head as he looked at it. There was not the slightest chance of forcing it, that he could see at a glance. He took a few steps away from it, and considered the wall. It was built of stone, faced and pointed, and was surmounted by an impressive row of broken bottles. Hopeless to attempt to scale that. No, the gate was his only chance.

This was at least twelve feet high, and crowned with spikes. But there was just one chance for an agile man. If he could get his foot on the padlock he might just be able to reach the spikes with the tips of his fingers.

He retreated from the gate once more, and then ran at it, leaping in the air, as he reached it. At the first half-dozen attempts he failed to find a foothold,

and slid down to the ground, scraping his hands and barking his shins. But at last his foot found the padlock, and rested there for one precarious moment. Even as it slipped off, he stretched up and clutched the spikes with his hand. There he hung, all his muscles tense, striving desperately to draw himself up, inch by inch. At last his other hand found a grip. He passed his legs over the spikes, regardless of bruised flesh and torn clothes. In a few seconds he had dropped on to the surface of the yard.

"By gad, I wouldn't tackle that again for a fortune," he muttered breathlessly. "Thank heaven it'll be easier to get out; I can pile some of this litter against the inside of the gate. Well, now I am here, let's have a look round this yard."

His search did not reveal anything of moment. The place was littered with fragments of disused machinery, which Dick's slight knowledge of engineering told him had not been used for the last fifty years at least. A shaft, very similar in appearance to the one he had already examined on the moor, had been sunk in one corner of the yard, and this showed signs of more recent clearing. A steel structure had been erected above it, to which was attached a pulley. Over this ran a cable, disappearing in one direction down the shaft, and in the other through a hole in the wall of the building.

"Don't go down the mine, daddy," quoted Dick to himself. "Well, I don't know that I want to, particularly, though I suppose there's a cage of some sort at the bottom end of that cable, and a winding engine at the other, inside the building. I don't see much to write home and tell mother about in this

blessed yard. If I'm to find anything it will be inside the building itself. The point is, how the deuce am I to get in?"

The door leading from the building into the yard was as solid-looking as the gate had been, and was fitted with a latch and a formidable-looking lock. "It looks as if I'm much forrarder, after all my trouble," murmured Dick, laying his hand on the latch reflectively.

To his astonishment, the door was unlocked.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

"THAT's queer," muttered Dick, as he walked through the door. "There can't be anything very valuable in here, if they leave the place open like that. I believe I've come on a fool's errand, after all."

It took a few seconds for his eyes to become accustomed to the comparative gloom of the interior, lighted as it was by a single window set high in the wall. He then perceived that he was in a flagged room, which had once evidently been the winding-house of the mine. The cable, which he had already seen leading down to the shaft, came through the hole in the wall to an old-fashioned winch, actuated by a pair of massive handles. Obviously the only means of raising the cage was by man-power. In contrast to the winch, and standing beside it, was a modern melting-furnace, with a row of crucibles and ladles. And in a corner of the room were stacked a number of pigs of metal, apparently lead.

Dick looked at these things with interest. The old man at the Anchor and Hope had been wrong, then, in his conjecture. The High Mendip Mining Syndicate had not removed everything of value from their premises. The lead, and also the furnace and its appurtenances, would certainly be worth removing and selling, if the Syndicate was concerned to realise its assets. On the other hand, if the Syndicate was merely a cloak for the gang controlled by the Funny Toff,

they would not worry about such trifles before their dispersal.

It seemed pretty clear that this must be the case, and that the place had merely been retained by the gang as one of its depots. Its isolated position rendered it ideal for such a purpose. Dick could see at a glance that no serious attempt at mining could possibly have been made. A hand-raised cage could never bring enough ore to the surface to make the place a commercial success, even if the ore existed, which seemed unlikely. Besides, there was no sign of any apparatus for smelting the ore on anything like a large scale. Yet some had undoubtedly been smelted, as the furnace and the pigs of lead proved. Was this only a blind, in case some inquisitive person should penetrate into the works?

The wind had increased to gale force, roaring angrily about the deserted building. Stray currents of it found their way in through the unglazed window, raising eddies of dust, and causing a loose sheet of corrugated iron somewhere to clatter maddeningly. There was a feeling of mystery about the place, a suggestion of voices whispering in the inaccessible cornices of the roof. Dick shivered in spite of himself, and drew his coat more closely round him. It was just the spot where death might lurk, violent and terrifying. Brooks's face had worn a look of terror, Sir Edric had said; he had seen all the horror of death approaching. And Brooks had died in that very spot, of that Dick felt certain.

In an attempt to avert the causeless panic which he felt closing round him, Dick endeavoured to reconstruct the scene. Brooks had found his way here,

following some clue picked up in Wapping. Or, was it not more likely that the clue had been purposely dropped at his feet, that he had been lured here of set purpose? Then, when he least expected, he had been assailed by superior force, his feet and hands bound, and lowered into the shaft. Dick imagined the heavy creaking of the winch as the cage descended, until it reached the invisible choking gas.

This would never do. Dick repressed, with a supreme effort, the overwhelming instinct which urged him to escape from the place and its horrible associations, and proceeded with his exploration.

The room in which he stood occupied, Dick reckoned, about half of the building. A second door was set inside a dividing wall, and this door, Dick discovered, was also unlocked. He passed through it, and found himself in an unlighted space where he was forced to use his torch in order to see where he was going. The rays of the torch revealed a huge cellar-like space, which, in the days when the mine was working, had evidently been used for the storage of ore, since the floor was still scattered with small fragments of galena. Off this main cellar, two smaller cellars opened, each closed with an iron door swung on rusty hinges.

So much Dick perceived before his eyes fell upon a small pile of timber, stacked away in a corner. He walked up to this, and examined it idly. It seemed to consist of broken pieces of packing-cases, and Dick was about to turn away from it when he caught sight, beneath the roughly-piled wood, of a nearly perfect case, the shape of which immediately struck him as familiar. He pushed some of the wood aside, until the whole

bulk of the case was revealed. It was exactly similar to the case in which Brooks's body had been packed.

This was yet another fact confirming what was now practically a certainty. The furnace in the outer room had evidently been delivered in these two cases, which had been thrown aside here after their contents had been unpacked. One had been chosen as being of a suitable size and shape to contain a dead body. The other had been left here.

Dick felt a thrill of satisfaction at this new discovery. Nobody could doubt now that this was where Brooks had been done to death. But a moment's reflection showed him that this evidence by itself was of very little value. The point to be ascertained was not so much where Brooks had died, as who murdered him. And so far he had discovered nothing which threw any light upon the identity of the men who had used the premises of the Syndicate.

Dick was pretty well satisfied that he had ascertained all that the place was likely to reveal. The next stop must be to return to London and report his discoveries to Scotland Yard. It was just possible that inquiries made in the neighbourhood might result in some clue which would lead eventually to the Funny Toff, although it appeared to Dick highly improbable. The most that was likely to result was the obtaining of descriptions of some of his agents. Since they had undoubtedly made their escape, this would not be much help. In fact, his examination of the place seemed to have revealed a sort of contemptuous carelessness on the part of the gang, in striking contrast to their previous wariness, as though its members knew that they were now beyond the reach of justice.

However, Dick thought, since he was here, he

might just as well inspect the place thoroughly. He had no intention of allowing Pollard the opportunity of discovering anything which he himself had overlooked. He walked up to one of the iron doors of the smaller cellars and tried it. It was locked, and resisted his utmost efforts to shake it. However, the door did not fit the doorway absolutely closely; a narrow chink remained by the hinges. By applying his torch to this, Dick was enabled to get a glimpse of the interior. This cellar appeared to be nearly full of various objects, of which the only things he could distinguish were a number of long cylinders. He could only see the lower ends of them, and concluded that they were steel pipes of some kind.

Further examination of this store-room would have to await the visit of the police, armed with a crow-bar. Dick would have liked to have seen inside it for himself, for probably its contents included the set of stencil plates with which the address had been painted on the case. But he could not hope to force the door without tools of any kind, so he turned away reluctantly and proceeded to investigate the second of the two smaller cellars.

The door of this one looked as though it had been recently repaired. It was far less rusty than the other, and Dick noticed that wooden battens had been fixed to the jambs, in order to make it a close fit. But to his surprise it was unlocked, and swung back with a harsh, grating sound as he pulled on the handle. It opened into a cell-like space, not more than eight feet square, and at first Dick supposed that this room had no other aperture but the doorway. However, upon closer examination with his torch, he discovered that a couple of bricks had been removed

from one of the walls, thus leaving a hole communicating with the outer room, in which the furnace and winch were situated. But for some reason, this hole, which was about on a level with Dick's shoulders, had been stopped tightly with matting and straw.

This room, though completely empty, was the only part of the works which did not share the general aspect of neglect. The walls had been lined with cement, so that they presented a relatively smooth surface, and the floor must have been swept out at some time, since it was free from the dirt that lay so thickly elsewhere. It seemed to Dick unaccountably draughty, until he looked up and saw that the wind had partly dislodged a tile in the roof above his head. A cold current of air came in through the gap thus made, although the tile was not sufficiently displaced to admit more than a dim gleam of light.

It was impossible to guess the purpose to which this room had been put, and Dick was about to leave it, after a swift glance round, when his eyes happened to fall upon the flagged floor at his feet. The dislodged tile had allowed the rain to drive in, and the water had dripped from the rafters, washing clean a circle about a foot in diameter on the floor. The joint between two flags ran across this circle, and in this joint, thus washed free of dirt, Dick noticed a strip of white.

He bent down to examine it more closely. It seemed to be a piece of paper or pasteboard, folded several times lengthways, and almost reduced to pulp by the moisture. Very carefully he withdrew it from between the flags, and unfolded it. It fell into sodden morsels as he handled it, but from its shape he guessed it to be an ordinary visiting card.

With a thrill of excitement he walked swiftly out of the room, and through the main cellar into the winding-house. Here at least there was light by which to examine his find. There was a name engraved upon it in copper-plate letters, the ink so faded as to be almost indistinguishable. With fingers trembling with excitement, he pieced it together as best he could. And then at last he could read the inscription, "Detective-Inspector Brooks, C.I.D."

Here at last was definite proof that he was on the right track. This was no misleading clue, placed by the gang to lead their pursuers astray. It would have been left in a more conspicuous place, if so; it was only by the merest accident that the rain had washed the dirt from between the flags in that one particular spot. Brooks must have placed it there himself in a last agonised attempt to ensure that, if he must die, he should not die unavenged.

Dick was aroused from his contemplation of the card by a loud clang, as of the closing of the outer gate, followed by the sound of men's footsteps crossing the yard.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

DICK was so astounded at this interruption, that for a moment he stood rooted to the ground, uncertain of the best course for him to take. Then, thrusting the sodden fragments of pasteboard into his pocket, he ran silently into the main cellar, closing the door.

The footsteps entered the building, and Dick could hear men moving about the outer room. There seemed to be two of them, and it was evident that they were familiar with the place. From where he stood, Dick could see nothing and could hear very little. He remembered the smaller cellar, with its opening through the wall. Very cautiously he crept into it and applied his ear to the straw with which the aperture was filled.

From this point of vantage he found that he could hear perfectly. "Better get the furnace going at once," one of the men was saying. "We'll want it as soon as Ben turns up. There's some wood in the old ore-cellar."

Dick felt a thrill of something uncomfortably like fear running down his spine. He recognised the voice as that of one of the men whom he had met at the Margate Jetty! There was no doubt about it; the voice had a curious catch in it which could not be mistaken. His theory, the certainty of safety which had induced him to explore the works, had been all wrong. The gang, far from being dispersed, had returned to its old haunts, prepared to carry out

some mysterious process, the nature of which he was unable to fathom.

His first impulse was towards escape. A desperate plan flashed through his mind. He would seize the opportunity when one of the men came into the main cellar to fetch the wood, to dash out of his hiding-place and attack the two men singly. But a moment's reflection showed him the futility of this. The men were probably armed, while he had not so much as a walking-stick. There were certainly some iron bars in the outer room, but how was he to reach them without his being discovered? And, while he struggled with one man, the other would come to his companion's aid.

Dick's one chance of safety, as he soon realised, was to stay where he was. The men were obviously unaware of his presence in the works, and it was at least possible that they would not have occasion to enter his hiding-place. They were unlikely to make a prolonged stay, and, once they were gone, he could escape.

It was the only possible thing for him to do, but the prospect of waiting quietly in his cell, in momentary fear of discovery, required some courage to face. It was probably upon the very spot where Dick stood that Brooks, a far more powerful man, had been overcome. The thought of Brooks's body, lying stark and cold in the packing-case, sent a new thrill of fear through him. The agents of the Funny Toff would have no mercy on eavesdroppers. Only the certainty that he would be instantly recognised restrained him from revealing himself, and explaining that he had merely entered the works to seek shelter from the storm.

He heard voices passing within a few feet of where he stood. One of the men had entered the main cellar, and was rummaging in the pile of broken wood. He went out again after a few minutes, and Dick could hear preparations for lighting the furnace. Very soon there was a crackling, and Dick guessed that the fire had taken hold.

"That's right, let it burn up a bit, Arthur," said the man whose voice he had already recognised. "We'll get a good fire burning, then melt the metal before Ben gets here. He won't be very long now."

"Lucky he got in before this storm came on," replied Arthur. Dick was not so sure of the voice this time, but he guessed that it belonged to the one of the Margate Jetty who had scarcely spoken half-a-dozen words. "What time did you get the message, Ted?"

"About nine o'clock, just before I came round to fetch you. The *Rosalie* got into Poole on the tide, about six. Ben will come by train from there to Masbury, and walk the rest of the way here. He's on the road now, I expect. Stoke up the furnace a bit, mate. It's blasted cold in here. I shan't be sorry to get back to that pub in Bristol."

The two men relapsed into silence, and Dick, in spite of his terror, which refused to be shaken off, found himself trying to fathom the meaning of their conversation. One thing seemed pretty clear. These two men had been waiting in Bristol, in different places, since Ted had "fetched" Arthur, for a message that the *Rosalie* had reached Poole. They had come to the rendezvous, where Ben was to meet them.

Since there could be no reasonable doubt that all three were members of the Funny Toff's gang, it was

pretty certain that their business was in some way connected with the Hatton Garden robbery. It began to dawn upon Dick that he had allowed his imagination to run away with him after his last visit to the wharf at Coldharbour Point. He had been right in his observations; the safes had certainly been loaded there on to some sort of craft, the *Rosalie*. But he had been too quick to assume that her destination was the Dutch coast.

The *Rosalie* had reached Poole at six o'clock that morning, roughly sixty hours from the probable time of her departure from Coldharbour Point. Had she been the seagoing motor-boat of Dick's imagination, she should have covered the two hundred miles from port to port in considerably less than half the time. Besides, since his conversation with Sir Edric, a special look-out was probably being kept for craft of that type. No, the *Rosalie* was probably an ordinary London barge, a type of craft so common in all the south-coast ports that her arrival in Poole would attract no attention. And two hundred miles in sixty hours was just about the rate of progress to be expected from a barge, given fair weather and a favourable wind.

What had actually happened slowly became clear to Dick. The *Rosalie* had no doubt loaded a perfectly genuine cargo for Poole, at some point on the river above Coldharbour Point. She had then dropped down to the wharf, remained there long enough to take the safes on board, and proceeded on her voyage. At some favourable opportunity the safes would be cut open, the stones taken out, and the safes thrown overboard. On the *Rosalie's* arrival in Poole, she would proceed to discharge her genuine cargo, while

Ben proceeded to the lead workings with the stones. Dick had little doubt that Ben would turn out to be the bargee of the Margate Jetty.

He had just reached this conclusion when Arthur spoke again. "What are the orders about getting rid of the stuff?" he asked.

"I had a message from the Boss," replied the man addressed as Ted. "A messenger is to come here and fetch it. He will ask for Professor Cobbold. That's all I know. The Boss isn't one to say more than he need."

"I say, Ted, have you ever seen the Boss?" inquired Arthur, in a low and awestruck voice.

"No, I've heard him, and that's enough for me," replied Ted emphatically. "Once you've heard the Funny Toff you aren't likely to want to ask him questions. Besides, it pays you better to do what he tells you. Start to double-cross him, and you find yourself as stiff as Pussy Herridge. And don't you make any mistake about that, my lad."

"You don't catch me playing any tricks!" exclaimed Arthur fervently. "I shan't forget that evening down by the river in a hurry. I can see Pussy's face now—Hullo, what's that?"

"Sounds like Ben's knock," replied the other man. "Slip along and let him in, mate."

Arthur obeyed him, and in a few minutes Dick heard a third voice in the outer room. He knew at once that he had not been mistaken. He recognised it as that of the bargee whom he had met in the Margate Jetty.

"Got 'em all right, Ben?" inquired Ted anxiously.

"Here they are, right enough," replied the deep voice of Ben. "Everything worked like clockwork

as usual. We had a devil of a job with those safes, though. They took us the best part of the second night out to get them open. They are at the bottom of the sea, now, somewhere between Dungeness and Beachy Head, where they won't be dredged up. All right your end, I suppose?"

"Right as can be," said Ted heartily. "You haven't seen the papers, of course. They are full of the job. Police in possession of clues, and all that. They found the lorry, of course, but Joe's well out of the way, so that doesn't matter. They've never tumbled to the *Rosalie*, anyhow."

"That's a good job," remarked Ben. "I was a bit nervous when we got in this morning. I'd been at sea a couple of days, and I didn't know what had happened. Of course I rigged up the wireless at night, when it couldn't be seen, but nothing came through on our special wave length. But as that was only to be used in cases of great emergency, I wasn't surprised."

"There's precious little the Boss doesn't think of!" exclaimed Ted admiringly. "What was your orders, if anything had gone wrong?"

"Chuck the stuff overboard, and continue the voyage," replied Ben tersely. "One code word over the wireless would have been enough. I'm glad it wasn't necessary, though. There'll be some profit out of this last haul, mate! Feel the weight of the stuff. I tell you, I almost wished there weren't so many of them stones by the time I'd started walking from Masbury Station."

"In spite of his precarious position, Dick felt a thrill of excitement. The proceeds of the Hatton Garden robbery were within a few feet of him, sepa-

rated from him only by a narrow brick wall. He could not resist a feeling of admiration for the Funny Toff's organization. But one thing still puzzled him. Once the stones had been safely landed at Poole, they could have been disposed of without much difficulty. Why had it been necessary to convey them to this remote corner of the Mendips, from whence this mysterious messenger was to fetch them? And who on earth was Professor Cobbold?

Dick was cramped with cold and with the necessity for remaining perfectly still. He could hear so plainly the voices in the next room, that he was in terror lest the men in their turn should hear his slightest movement. But, fortunately for him, they were busy with their task, whatever it was. He could hear the deep roaring of the furnace, now evidently in full blast, and the exclamations of admiration as the men examined the stones which Ben had brought.

And then once more came Ted's voice. "That fire'll do now, Arthur. Let's get on with the job."

CHAPTER THIRTY

WHATEVER the job was, it was evident that the furnace played the principal part in it. Ted was evidently the directing spirit, for Dick could hear his voice giving instructions. It seemed to him that the men were placing one of the pigs of lead into a crucible, and were melting it down.

Upon the reason for this procedure he could not hazard a guess. Nor was he any further enlightened by what he heard next. There was silence for some minutes, apparently while the metal was melting, and then Ted spoke again. "It'll be ready to pour in a moment. Got your mould ready, Arthur?"

Ben was the next to speak. "Hullo, there's some letters on it. Blest if I can make out what they mean, though. Whatever did you make the mould like that for? The pig will be quite different from any I've ever seen."

"Orders," replied Arthur briefly. "I was told to go to the British Museum, number of the room and all given to me, and copy a pig of lead I should find in a particular case. While I was making sketches of it I had a look at the description. It was found close by here, Lord knows how many centuries ago. That lettering you see in the mould is the inscription that was on it. My job is to make this pig as much like it as possible."

"Well, if your mould's ready, the metal's fit to pour," remarked Ted. "It's not too hot. You stand

by, ready to put the stuff in, Ben. All ready, Arthur?"

"All ready, mate." The metal was poured, and the men desisted from their task for a moment. "Give it a minute or two to set," advised Arthur. "While it's still soft, I want to hit it about with a hammer. The one in the Museum was a bit battered. Then we'll put it in the pickle."

"That's the warmest job I've met to-day," remarked Ted. "Keep the furnace going a bit longer; I don't know exactly what time the messenger is coming, and I don't want to have to wait here in the cold. You two chaps can clear out as soon as you've finished."

"I'll wait till Arthur's finished, then I'll get back to Poole," said Ben. "I mustn't be away from the barge longer than I can help. Where are you bound for, Arthur?"

"Back to Bristol, to wait further orders," replied Arthur. "We chaps that did the job have been told to keep away from London. You're all right, you hadn't any hand in it."

"I bust open those blessed safes single-handed, and that's as tough a job as any you had," grumbled Ben. "The other two chaps I had on board had never seen the flame used before, and they were no use. What's the next move, Arthur?"

"Get the pickle ready," replied Arthur. "There's a wooden tub over there. You want just enough water to cover the pigs. That'll do, I've got the acids ready mixed, and all we've got to do is to pour them in. We'll want a pair of tongs, for the pigs will have to go in while it's still hot. Right, Ted, drop it in."

There was a loud sound of hissing, and Dick guessed that the pig had been put into the tub. After a while

Arthur gave directions for it to be lifted out. "That's not a bad fake!" he exclaimed. "You wouldn't know it wasn't the own brother to the one in the Museum."

"Pretty good," conceded Ted. "Nobody would guess that we'd cast it half an hour ago. We'll just wrap it up in some paper, and then it's ready for the messenger. What do you reckon it weighs, Ben?"

"Best part of a hundredweight, and an antique like that's worth its weight in gold," replied Ben. The joke seemed to appeal to the men, for they laughed heartily.

Dick, listening intently, his ear applied to the hole in the wall, was completely mystified. He remembered Dr. Weatherleigh saying that pigs of lead dating from Roman times had been found in the Mendips, and no doubt one of these was in the British Museum. But why on earth had these men gone to the trouble of copying it? Was the faking of antiques a branch of the Funny Toff's activities? It was possible, but somehow unlikely. A man who could carry out a coup on the scale of the Hatton Garden robbery would hardly turn his hand to so inconsiderable a trade as this.

Still, whatever had been the motive, the pig was cast and the purpose for which the men had come here apparently accomplished. Dick had found inspiration in Ted's remark, that he was the only one who need wait. From that moment his plan of action was determined. As soon as the other two had gone, he would creep out of his hiding-place and fall upon Ted unawares. Every detail was clear in his mind. His eyes, accustomed to the not quite complete darkness of the cellar, would enable him to avoid stumbling as he made his way out. From the door of the main

cellar he ought to be able to see how Ted was sitting. If he had his back to him, it would all be simple enough. If not, he would have to take the chances of a quick rush. Ted, if he remembered right, was a considerably smaller man than he was. He ought to find no difficulty in tying him up and gagging him.

Once Ted was disposed of, there remained the messenger. He was an unknown factor. The pig weighed the best part of a hundredweight, Ben had said. The messenger would, therefore, be certain to arrive with some sort of vehicle. Dick profoundly hoped that he would be driving it himself. The fewer people he had to tackle, the greater his chance of success. The messenger was obviously unknown to Ted, and it was fair to assume that Ted would be unknown to him. Dick would impersonate Ted, and bring the messenger into the works. As he was bending down to examine the pig, Dick would go for him. By that time he would have possessed himself of Ted's weapon, if he was carrying one. He would tie him up and lay him beside Ted. Then he would commandeer the messenger's vehicle—he would find a means of dealing with the driver if there happened to be one—and drive as fast as he could into Wells.

All sense of his personal danger left Dick at the prospect. With his own hands he would have captured at least two of the gang, and his information would enable the police to round up three more on board the *Rosalie*. Surely one of these agents was bound, intentionally or otherwise, to reveal some fact which would lead to the discovery of the principal! If so, it would be entirely owing to his own initiative, through the fertility of his own imagination, that the

Funny Toff would be captured! He need fear no further sarcasm from Scotland Yard.

Unfortunately, this optimistic scheme seemed destined to delay. Ben and Arthur seemed to be in no hurry to go, and Dick was by no means prepared to attack the three of them. And then suddenly Ted spoke. "Stop the row a minute!" he exclaimed: "I believe I heard a car."

There was a moment's silence. "Yes, I thought so," continued Ted rapidly. "It's turning at the end of the lane. It'll be the messenger right enough. I'm supposed to be here alone. You two clear out and hide in the little room. I don't know who he is, but it won't do for him to see you. Look sharp!"

Dick braced his nerves to the crisis which he knew had come at last. The little room could be none other than the cell in which he was himself concealed. He heard the two men enter the cellar and approach the iron door. He took up his stand beside it in such a position that he would not be seen immediately the door opened.

It seemed to him an age before the door creaked on its hinges and the light of a torch shone into the room. Arthur was leading, with Ben close behind him. Dick waited until Arthur was just inside the door then, putting all his force behind the blow, he swung his fist towards the point of the man's jaw. But, half-dazzled by the unaccustomed light of the torch, he missed his aim, and struck the unsuspecting Arthur full on the shoulder. The man uttered a shout of amazement, and reeled heavily against the door-post, the torch flying out of his hands and leaving the cellar in darkness.

"What the hell's the matter, mate?" exclaimed Ben. "What did you chuck your torch away for? I can't see."

"Something fell on me and knocked it out of my hand," replied Arthur. "Light a match, quick! I'm not going in there in the dark. I haven't been in there since——"

He was interrupted by Ted, who put his head through the door of the main cellar. "What the devil are you two chaps making all that row about?" he inquired angrily. "For the Lord's sake, get into the little room and keep quiet. The car will be here any minute."

Arthur backed clear of the doorway, and Dick, with no very clear idea in his mind as to what he should do next, but determining at all costs to avoid being caught like a rat in a trap, rushed out past him. At the same moment Ben struck his match and, seeing him, uttered a roar like a bull. "There's some one in here, Ted!" he shouted. "Hold the door, he can't escape."

Then began a hunt, in which Dick was the rat and the three others the dogs. The men were either not armed or were afraid to use them for fear of hitting one another in the fitful light of the torch, which Arthur had now recovered. It was conducted in a silence broken only by the panting of hunters and hunted, and by the shuffling of their feet.

At last Dick's foot slipped, and in a second they were on him. He kept his arms free long enough to strike out with all the desperation that he felt, and he felt his blows go home. But the odds were too great, and, after a titanic struggle, he was hurled to the floor, and his arms securely bound behind him.

"Where the hell did this chap come from?" demanded Ted. "He must have been here all the time. Here, Arthur, show us your light, and let's have a look at him."

Dick felt himself brutally kicked over, until the light of the torch shone in his face. The three men leant over him and then uttered a simultaneous expression of amazement. Ben was the first to speak. "Blast me if it isn't the bloke what came nosing round the Margate Jetty!" he exclaimed.

"Well, whoever he is, he won't nose any more," replied Ted, in a casual tone which made Dick's blood run cold. "He'll have to wait until I've finished with this messenger chap. Shove something in his mouth, one of you, so that he can't call out, and then take him into the little room with you. If he tries to make a noise, knife him."

He hurried out of the cellar, while the other two dragged Dick to his feet and gagged him effectually. Then, half-carried and half-pushed, he was thrust into the cell that had been his hiding-place. The two men followed him, shutting the door behind them. Suddenly Dick felt a sharp prick at his throat, and the voice of Ben whispered in his ear: "Feel that? That's the point of my knife. The first sound you make, in it goes, up to the hilt."

Once more Dick heard the sound of the outer gate being opened and closed. But this time a car had evidently been driven into the yard, he could hear the sound of the engine. Then that stopped, and he heard the sound of footsteps crossing the yard and entering the building. Dick could not distinguish sounds so plainly as he had before, for he had been forced into the corner, away from the aperture. But

he could faintly hear Ted's voice, explaining that Professor Cobbold had been unable to keep his appointment. If, however, there was anything he could do——?

A second voice replied to him, a voice that thrilled Dick to the very centre of his being. It was clear and penetrating, and every word rang like a clarion call through Dick's brain. "I expect that Professor Cobbold told you that I was coming to fetch the leaden pig which he has found?"

Even Dick's two captors could not restrain a start of astonishment at hearing the tones of a girl. For the voice was Alison's.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

"I HAVE it already for you, miss," replied Ted readily. "It's wrapped up in this paper. Perhaps you would like to see it."

There was a rustling of paper, and then Alison's voice again. "Yes, that's just how it was described to me. If you wouldn't mind helping me to put it in the back of the car——"

"Certainly, miss." Then the voices ceased, and Dick heard footsteps going out into the yard. The whirr of a self-starter, the steady beat of the engine, and then the heavy clang of the outer gate.

The men guarding him made no move until Ted returned and opened the iron door. "The Boss is a deep one!" he exclaimed. "That girl now—a fair stunner she was. I wonder where she's bound for, and how the Boss means to get hold of the pig! She knows nothing about it, that I'll swear. Now then, what about this bloke you found? Captain Blackwood he called himself, didn't he?"

"He's here safe enough," replied Ben. "Lucky we found him before you were left alone."

"It's not lucky for him," said Ted menacingly. "There's only one thing to be done, of course. He's tied up all right, I suppose?"

"Trust me for that!" exclaimed Ben. "He's not the first of 'em I've had to deal with."

"What are you going to do with him, Ted?" in-

quired Arthur in a shaky voice. "Hadn't you better ask the Boss before——?"

He left the remainder of the sentence unfinished, but there was very little doubt of his meaning. Dick lay quite still. Resistance was impossible.

Ted turned on Arthur viciously. "You always were a chicken-hearted skunk!" he said. "I wonder the Boss has put up with you so long. Perhaps you'd like to stop here with him, would you? Ask the Boss first! Why, don't you see, you fool, he's been in here all the time, listening? The Boss would murder me if I let him leave here alive. What do you say, Ben?"

"If you don't do him in, I shall," replied Ben simply. "I'm running no risks."

"Well, that's settled," said Ted. "There's plenty of the stuff left over from what we brought down for that detective chap. I'll let the Boss know, and if he wants the body, we can come back later and get it. That second packing case will do, with a little patching up. Now you two fellows had better get off. I shall know where to find you if I want you."

Ben turned to Dick. "I warned you, Captain," he said complacently. "In that pub at Wapping, the first evening we met. Remember? I told you that if you tried to double-cross the Boss you'd long for an easy death. Well, as it happens, you're going to get it. You're luckier than some."

Ben left the place, taking Arthur with him. Dick heard their departing footsteps, and the clanging of the gate behind them. Ted made no remark until he and Dick were left alone. "I wonder how you found your way to this place, Mr. Penhampton," he said quietly. "However, it doesn't matter, since you

won't leave it alive. You've been let off twice, but you can't expect to get away with it a third time. You've tempted Providence once too often."

He bent down and inspected Dick's bonds. His hands had been tied together behind his back with a piece of stout cord, and his mouth was securely gagged with a couple of filthy handkerchiefs. Ted seemed satisfied with his inspection, for he left the room without another word. He closed the iron door behind him, and Dick heard the grating of the bolt forced into its socket. Then there was the sound of a key being inserted in the door of the second of the small cellars, the one that was used as a store-room. Dick heard the man he knew as Ted moving about in there, and then a strange hissing noise, the cause of which he could not place.

Ted seemed in no great hurry. He left the store-room, locking the door behind him, and then passed into the outer room. There came a sound of hammering against the partition wall, as though something were being nailed to it. At last Dick heard Ted's footsteps as he left the place, and once more the dull clang of the outer gate. Then silence, and Dick knew that he was left alone to his fate.

What that fate was to be, he did not at first understand. The curious hissing noise continued, faintly heard above the moaning of the wind, which seemed if anything to have increased in intensity. But to this Dick paid no attention, his mind was full of the agony of his helplessness. Not so much on his own account, as on Alison's. For he understood at last the part which the devilish ingenuity of the Funny Toff had allotted to her in the matter.

His first impulse, when he heard her voice, had

been to make some struggle, at whatever risk to himself, that would be heard in the outer room. His idea had been that she would be alarmed, that she would be enabled perhaps to make her escape from this sinister spot. But if she had not escaped! Any interference on his part would have led to her sharing his own fate; it would be folly to expect the gang to show consideration for anybody, man or woman, if their plans were threatened. No, it was better to let her leave the place.

The casting of the pig was now clear to him. The stones brought by Ben from Poole had been inserted in the molten metal, and the forged antique now contained the proceeds of the Hatton Garden robbery. That, of course, was why the stones had been brought to the mine. They were now safely hidden.

Even in Dick's present position, the ingenuity of the scheme forced itself upon him. He could piece it together from what he had overheard. Dr. Weatherleigh had been informed of the discovery of an ancient pig of lead in some old workings of the Mendips, by some one purporting to be Professor Cobbold. He had sent Alison to fetch it, in order that he might examine it. But it was never to be allowed to reach him, since an expert of his standing would recognise it as a forgery at first glance. Somewhere on the road to Lestridge Hall Alison would be stopped and the pig taken from her. But—would she be allowed to continue her journey unharmed? Was not this the development which he had always feared? The Funny Toff had decided to avenge his own interference upon the woman he loved!

At this terrible prospect, Dick's self-control deserted him. He tore madly at the cords which bound

him, strove savagely to dislodge the choking gag which filled his mouth. But his efforts were unavailing, and after a few moments of wild-eyed desperation, he staggered against the wall of his cell, and, unable to preserve his balance, rebounded and fell heavily to the floor.

The shock sobered him. If he were to save Alison, to save himself, he must at all costs keep calm and bring the whole power of his mind to bear upon the problem of escape. He lay for a while where he had fallen, striving desperately to think. Bound as he was, there was no means of escape from the cell. If only he could free his hands——

He became aware that a strange lassitude was creeping over him, that he was breathing deeply, almost gasping for breath. It must be the gag which was suffocating him. He tried to take a deep breath, but the effort choked him. A deadly weariness seemed to have overtaken him, numbing his muscles and his brain. The hissing noise rang in his ears, which throbbed dully with it. Then, in a sudden access of understanding, he realised the manner of death which had been prepared for him.

In a wild panic he struggled to his feet, and leaned panting against the wall of his cell. Gradually his breath returned, his functions resumed their activities. But, if he were to escape the fate of Inspector Brooks, he must find a means of escape at once.

He understood now the reason for Ted's visit to the store-room, and the cause of the hissing noise which had followed it. The steel cylinders which he had seen through the crack in the door were carbon dioxide gas reservoirs, and the cell in which he was imprisoned was a lethal chamber. This accounted for

the closely-fitting doors, for the stuffing up of the hole in the wall. The hissing was the sound of the gas escaping from the cylinders, through a pipe which led into the cell. Being heavier than air, the gas would settle first on the floor, which accounted for the symptoms he had felt as he lay there. It would rise slowly, until it suffocated him.

This then was how Brooks had met his death, not by the clumsy method of lowering him into the shaft. Something of the terror which had left its traces on his face overcame Dick, as he listened to the hissing which told of the steady rise of the gas. And then he felt a cold draught playing upon him. With a sudden thrill of thankfulness, he realised that one slight chance had been afforded him. The wind, blowing through the damaged roof, sent stray currents of air down into the cell. This might at least dilute the gas, and delay its fatal rise.

The thought was like a tonic to him, and with it came a ray of hope. The hole in the wall was edged with rough bricks. If he could only reach them with his bound hands, he might possibly be able to fray the cord against them. He dashed across the cell, and found that by standing on tiptoe, his back against the hole, he could just manage to reach its lower edge. Frantically he began to chafe his wrists against the edge of the bricks.

His strained position became an agony, yet he persisted, gasping for breath, the sweat pouring from his forehead and blinding him. Then came a lull in the storm, the clean, fresh air no longer opposed the gas, which was rapidly filling the cell. Once more his breathing became laboured; the awful lassitude crept over him, until he could no longer force his

muscles to maintain their position. With a groan he sank down upon his heels, but, as he did so, he tore at his bonds with one last convulsive wrench. The cord, frayed by his efforts, cracked and yielded. His hands were free.

For a second he leaned against wall, exhausted by his efforts, struggling for breath. Then he raised his bleeding wrists and with numbed fingers struggled with the handkerchiefs which gagged him. This done, he turned to the straw and canvas with which the hole was stuffed. He was working automatically now, struggling feebly against unconsciousness. The straw came away in his hands. Beyond it, on the far side of the wall, a board had been nailed across the opening.

This last blow almost overcame him. He staggered back, only by a superhuman effort saving himself from the fall from which he would never have risen.

Then, in one last access of despair, he hurled himself at the aperture, beating upon the board with his fists. It yielded half an inch or so, and he collapsed against the wall, his head in the opening, drinking in the faint current of air.

A few deep breaths revived him, and once more he battered at the board with his bare hands. At last it yielded, and fell with a crash upon the floor of the outer room. A heaven-sent gust of air swept into the cell. He was saved.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

WITH the realisation that he had escaped the death which had been prepared for him, Dick's mind returned to the danger which threatened Alison. He had no idea how much time had elapsed since her departure; the outer room into which he looked was almost in darkness. He took out his watch, and was just able to read the time. It was a quarter-past four.

One thing was quite plain, that there was no time to be lost. But, though he had averted the danger of suffocation, he was as far as ever from escaping from his prison. To attempt the door was hopeless, it was fastened with a bolt at least an inch in diameter. The hole in the wall was far too small to allow his body to pass, and there was no means of reaching the roof. He stood for a moment in thought and then an idea struck him. He had a small penknife in his pocket, and with this he began to attack the mortar between the bricks surrounding the opening. It was softer than he dared hoped, and after a while he succeeded in removing one of the bricks. Three or four more, and he would be able to squeeze through.

It was maddeningly slow work, but in the course of an hour he had contrived to widen the hole enough for him to crawl through into the outer room. Almost exhausted as he was by his recent experiences, the climbing of the gate seemed to him an insuperable obstacle. It was, however, an easier task from inside than from without; the battens to which the planks

of the gate were nailed afforded him some sort of foothold. Painfully he clambered up, poised himself on the top, and prepared to descend. Then his bruised and torn hands relaxed their grasp and he fell heavily to the ground outside.

He lay there for a few moments, half-stunned, then wearily picked himself up. A faint twilight still covered the moor, across which swept the rear-guard of the gale, angry biting squalls, bringing a stinging sleet with them. He bent his head and staggered forward into the teeth of the wind.

His purpose was clear. He must reach Wells, and there get into touch with Dr. Weatherleigh on the telephone. He would know Alison's plans—the road she proposed to take on her return journey. Then the police could be told to look out for the car, and to take her to some place of safety—if only, by the time they were warned, it was not too late!

Dick dragged himself on, forcing his will to overcome the utter weariness of his limbs. Suddenly, ahead of him he saw a pair of lights. He stopped and peered anxiously towards them. There were no houses in that direction, he felt sure. Could this be some of the gang, returning to dispose of his body? He left the road and lay down behind some gorse.

The lights drew nearer and very soon Dick's ears caught the sound of a horse's hoofs. They drew nearer still, until Dick could make out the outlines of the advancing vehicle. It was the trap in which he had driven from the station the previous night.

Dick stepped from his hiding-place, and tottered towards it. A cheerful hail greeted him, and he heard the voice of the landlord of the Anchor and Hope. "Is that you, Mr. Penhampton?" he said. "We've

been terrible anxious about you, since you didn't come back to catch the train. Thought you'd got lost in the storm, mostlike. Hearing you talk to old Gaffer Dule last night I thought as how you might have come over this way. Jump in, sir, and I'll drive you back."

Dick approached the trap and clambered wearily in. Then, for the first time, the landlord noticed his condition, and uttered an exclamation of concern. "Why, whatever have you been doing of, sir?" he inquired.

"Had an accident," replied Dick briefly. "Fell down one of those old shafts, and had a devil of a job to get out. Now I must get into Wells as fast as ever you can drive."

"You were lucky to get out at all, sir," said the landlord impressively. "There's many a one fallen down them pits and never been seen alive again. But you can't go back to London like that, sir. Better let me drive you home, where you can get a change."

"I'll change later," replied Dick. "I must get to Wells without losing a moment. It's a matter of life and death, man."

The landlord, a discreet man in his way, made no further comment. The rest of the drive was made in silence, and the lights of Wells came in sight as the Cathedral clock was striking six. They were entering the town when a breakdown lorry passed them, towing a car which had obviously been involved in an accident.

Dick recognised it at once. He had seen it often enough when he was staying at Lestridge Hall. It was Alison's own two-seater, which she always drove herself. He was too late.

He shouted at the top of his voice, and the driver

of the breakdown lorry looked round. Dick beckoned to him to stop, and as the trap drew up alongside he asked incoherently for the details of the accident. He knew the car. Had a lady not been driving it?

"Yes, that's right, sir," replied the man. "Queer thing, she was driving along the Shepton road, not five miles from here, when a tree came down on top of her. There's a dozen or more trees come down in this gale that I see. There's not a lot of damage done. The radiator's done in, and the front axle's buckled, but that's all."

"But what about the lady who was driving, man?" interrupted Dick impatiently.

"They'd taken her away afore I got there," replied the man. "'Bout three o'clock it happened, from what they told me. A branch of the tree caught her, they say. Took her away in an ambulance to the hospital, from what I hear."

The ominous words fell like blows upon Dick's heart. It was impossible to tell from them whether Alison was alive or dead. The landlord had already turned his horse's head and was driving rapidly in a fresh direction.

"The hospital, quick as ever you can!" cried Dick.

"Aye, sir," replied the landlord. "That's where we're bound for. We'll learn about the lady there."

They reached the hospital in a very few minutes and Dick leapt out and pealed frantically at the bell. In a few minutes he was in the presence of the matron, who listened sympathetically to his inquiry.

"Miss Weatherleigh?" she replied: "I'm afraid that you cannot see her at present. She is still unconscious. It is very difficult to say how seriously she is injured yet, but the doctor has ascertained that

there are no bones broken. A very serious concussion—more than that I cannot say. The only clue we had to her identity was a letter we found in her bag, and addressed to Miss Weatherleigh, Lestridge Hall, Lincolnshire. I put a trunk call through as soon as she was brought in, and was able to speak to her father. He was very much distressed at the news, and is on his way here now."

Her glance travelled from Dick's pallid face to his torn hands, still clotted with blood. "You appear to have met with an accident yourself," she continued. "You had better let me tie up those wounds."

Dick allowed himself to be led unresistingly to the surgery, where his hands were cleaned and bound up. Then the matron ventured the question which had been on her lips since his entrance. "You are a relative of Miss Weatherleigh's, perhaps?"

"I am engaged to be married to her," replied Dick simply.

"Then no doubt you will be glad to be on the spot," said the matron. "I have an empty room, which you can occupy to-night as a patient. You seem utterly done up. If I promise to call you if there should be any change in Miss Weatherleigh's condition, will you go up there and lie down? You're no use to anybody in your present state."

"I must see Dr. Weatherleigh the moment he comes," replied Dick. "I've had a most unfortunate accident, and I'm afraid I'm utterly played out."

"Of course you are, any one can see that," she interrupted. "Now then, drink this, and then you can lie down for a little."

Dick allowed himself to be led to a small private

ward, where he lay down on the bed. In a few minutes his weariness overcame him, and he fell into the deep sleep of utter exhaustion.

He was awakened by a touch on his shoulder, and started up, in full possession of his senses, to confront the matron. "I've good news for you," she said. "Miss Weatherleigh has regained consciousness, and her brain shows no ill effects from the blow. In fact, I think that, before very long, we shall be able to move her to her home. We have told her that you are here, and you may see her for a second or two."

She led him into Alison's room, tactfully remaining outside the door. Alison gave a little cry of delight as she saw him, and he bent down and kissed her tenderly. "How do you feel, sweetheart?" he asked.

"All right," she replied bravely. "I've got a dreadful headache, though, as if I'd had a night out. Listen, Dick, I had an old pig of lead in the car when that tree hit me. It belongs to a friend of father's, and I was taking it to Lestridge Hall for father to see. I believe it's very valuable, but nobody was to know anything about it till father had examined it. You might find out what has become of it."

"I'll see to it for you," replied Dick cheerfully. "It's probably still in the car, which I saw being towed to a garage. But you needn't worry about it, darling. Dr. Weatherleigh has been told of your accident, and he is on his way here now."

The matron interrupted their conversation, and led Dick from the room. "The less she is allowed to talk the better," she said. "All she wants is perfect rest. Dr. Weatherleigh ought to be here very soon now, he telephoned from London three or four hours ago,

asking for the latest news, and saying that he was continuing the journey by car, since there was no train for some hours."

Dick looked at his watch. To his amazement it was nearly eight o'clock in the morning; he had slept the clock round. There was no time to be lost. Alison's accident had driven everything else out of his mind, but now the events of the previous day returned to his memory with redoubled force. He must get in touch with Sir Edric, and tell him everything.

He found that the landlord of the Anchor and Hope, learning that he had remained at the hospital for the night, had brought over his suit-case. He therefore changed his torn and mud-begrimed clothes and left the hospital, with the intention of telephoning Sir Edric. But, on the way, he decided to wait till he had seen Dr. Weatherleigh, whose arrival could not be much longer delayed. His evidence as to the source from which he heard of the existence of the leaden pig was essential.

Dick, therefore, went instead to the garage to which Alison's car had been towed. He was allowed to inspect it, and found that the pig was still in the dickey. This, Dick reflected, was probably the safest place for it at present. It bore no clue as to its real value, and nobody was likely to tamper with it, owing to its weight. Having satisfied himself on this point, he returned to the hospital.

As he approached it, a car drove up, and a passenger alighted from it. He recognised Dr. Weatherleigh and hastened to meet him. The doctor turned at the sound of his footsteps.

"Dick! You here? What does it mean?" he exclaimed.

Dick put his hand on Dr. Weatherleigh's arm. "It's all right, Doctor," he replied reassuringly. "Alison's going on splendidly. Come along in, they'll let you see her."

"Thank God!" said Dr. Weatherleigh. "I was afraid—afraid—" and he did not finish the sentence.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

DICK waited impatiently for Dr. Weatherleigh's reappearance. Now that he was assured of Alison's recovery, he was desperately anxious to put the police on the track of the gang, before its members had time to disperse. In that Dr. Weatherleigh could assist him. Indeed, it was quite possible that his evidence might put Scotland Yard on the path that would lead eventually to the Funny Toff.

Alison's accident must have thrown the whole plan out of gear, so much was evident. The men detailed to waylay her could not have heard of the mishap, and they must be in complete ignorance as to the whereabouts of the leaden pig. This, Dick determined, should be deposited at the local police station, as soon as Dr. Weatherleigh's permission was obtained. On the whole, as things had turned out, the accident was the best thing that could have happened. Alison, at least, was in perfect safety.

At last Dr. Weatherleigh appeared, looking far less anxious than he had on his arrival. "Alison has had a most merciful escape," he said. "I was fortunate enough to see the doctor in charge of the case, and he assures me that no ill consequences are to be feared. She requires complete rest and quiet, he tells me. Even you and I are not to see her for the present. But I do not understand how you heard the news of her accident?"

"That's rather a long story, Doctor," Dick replied.

"It's long and it involves a very urgent matter——"

"Yes, I know," interrupted Dr. Weatherleigh. "You mean Professor Cobbold's discovery of the early Roman pig. Alison told me that she had asked you to make inquiries as to its safety. Have you succeeded?"

"Yes, it's safe enough," replied Dick. "It is still in the back of the car, in a garage close by here."

"Ah, that is a great relief to my mind!" exclaimed Dr. Weatherleigh fervently. "It would have been a disaster if anything had happened to it. You see, it is not my property, though if it is as Professor Cobbold describes it, I shall endeavour to purchase it for my collection. As an antique, it is exceedingly valuable."

"It is certainly exceedingly valuable," replied Dick slowly. "But not as an antique, I am afraid. In fact, I have the best of reasons for knowing it to be a forgery."

"A forgery!" exclaimed Dr. Weatherleigh incredulously. "My dear boy, that is absolutely impossible! Professor Cobbold distinctly told me that he had examined it himself. He is one of the leading authorities upon antiquities of the Roman period, and it is ridiculous that he could be deceived."

"When did you see Professor Cobbold, Doctor?" asked Dick quietly.

"I did not see him," replied Dr. Weatherleigh. "He rang me up from London, the morning of the day before yesterday. He described his find most enthusiastically, and told me that he did not wish to announce it until I had seen it, and confirmed his opinion as to its exact date. I asked him to bring it to Lestridge Hall, so that we might examine it together, but

he explained that his engagements would not permit him to do so. We therefore arranged that Alison should drive down and fetch it in her car. She was to start at once, and stay the night at the Empire Hotel in Bath. Professor Cobbold was to ring her up there yesterday morning, and make an appointment with her."

"Did you ask Alison just now if this actually happened?" Dick inquired.

"I did. She told me that Professor Cobbold rang her up, and asked her to come to some disused workings, close to the place where the pig had been found, where either the Professor himself or his assistant would meet her. He described the situation of the workings exactly, and she had no difficulty in finding them. She arrived there shortly after two o'clock, the time fixed by the Professor, and was given the pig. She then started home, intending to reach London last night. Her intention was to call on you, and ask you to drive back with her to Lestridge Hall to-day."

"Are you quite certain that it was Professor Cobbold who spoke to you on the telephone?" persisted Dick.

"Why, what doubt could there possibly be?" replied Dr. Weatherleigh. "Voices are often indistinct over a trunk line, as you know. But there is no reason to suppose that it was not Professor Cobbold speaking."

There was every reason to suppose that it was not Professor Cobbold, thought Dick, unless Professor Cobbold and the Funny Toff were one and the same person. This might be so, but it seemed highly im-

probable. Much more likely that the Funny Toff had used the Professor's name, knowing the weight that it would carry with Dr. Weatherleigh. No doubt Sir Edric would be able to trace that trunk call, and so obtain a definite starting point for his inquiries.

His thoughts were interrupted by Dr. Weatherleigh. "I still don't see, Dick, how you got here. I assume that Alison communicated with you from Bath, asking you to meet her."

"No, she didn't do that," replied Dick slowly. "But, as a matter of fact, I was actually inside the workings when the pig was cast, and when, an hour or two later, Alison came to fetch it."

"When the pig was cast!" exclaimed Dr. Weatherleigh, in a tone of complete bewilderment. "My dear boy, you must be suffering from hallucinations! The pig was cast hundreds, perhaps thousands of years ago. Or, alternatively, if it were only cast yesterday, as you say, how could Professor Cobbold, or any one else, for that matter, have known of its existence the previous day?"

"I'm afraid that we are all involved in a gigantic conspiracy," replied Dick gravely. "The whole thing is merely another of the Funny Toff's amazing escapades. Listen, Doctor."

Dick recounted at length everything that had happened to him since he left Lestridge Hall. Dr. Weatherleigh listened with close attention, occasionally uttering an exclamation of astonishment or concern. When Dick had come to an end of his story, he remained for some moments lost in thought.

"There would appear to be only one thing to be done," he said at last. "It is your duty to place the

facts in possession of your friend, Sir Edric Conway, and that at once, before these miscreants have time to make their escape."

"I propose to get on to the telephone to him immediately," replied Dick.

"It would be far more satisfactory to interview him personally," remarked Dr. Weatherleigh. "It will only mean a delay of a couple of hours at most, for you can catch the next train to London, and take the pig with you. If you care for me to do so, I will accompany you, for Sir Edric will doubtless like to hear my account."

"I should be only too glad if you would, Doctor," replied Dick eagerly.

"Since I am not allowed to see Alison, I have no objection," said Dr. Weatherleigh. "I can return here after the interview. We had better start at once; there is, I believe, a train about ten o'clock."

Dick agreed. He set out to purchase a suit-case large enough to contain the pig. Dr. Weatherleigh, while he was doing this, suggested sending a telegram to Sir Edric, announcing their intended arrival. They met at the garage, where Dr. Weatherleigh looked closely at the pig before it was put into the suit-case.

"A very clever forgery, if, indeed, it is one," he remarked. "I could form no opinion as to its genuineness without a very careful and detailed examination. It appears to be very heavy. Do you think that we can manage it between us?"

"Oh, yes," replied Dick confidently. "We'll get the garage people to drive us to the station, and a porter can put it under the seat of a carriage for us. I don't feel like letting it out of my sight."

"You are quite right," agreed Dr. Weatherleigh.

"We have assumed a great repsonsibility. I am not sure, even now, that we ought not to place it in the care of the local police."

But Dick protested. "That would mean a waste of time," he replied. "We haven't too much time to catch our train, as it is. Besides, Scotland Yard will want to keep this in their own hands. They wouldn't be pleased if we let the local police in."

Dr. Weatherleigh allowed himself to be overruled, and they started for the station. They secured a first-class carriage for themselves, and the suit-case, containing the pig, was placed under the seat. Dick heaved a sigh of relief as the train started. His task, at least, was at an end. An unforeseen accident, the falling of the tree upon Alison's car, had thrown the Funny Toff's plans out of gear, and had afforded the opportunity for the police to get on his track. Yes, but had it not been for the reasoning which had guided him to the deserted workings, the secret of the leaden pig would never have been solved. The Funny Toff's agents would eventually have traced it, and would, no doubt, have found some means of recovering possession of it. Sir Edric would certainly have cause to modify his opinion of the amateur detective.

Although Dick realised that the capture of the Funny Toff himself was the ultimate object to be aimed at, he was keenly interested in the fate of his agents. His information would enable the police to round up the three men who had attempted to murder him, and in the thought he found considerable satisfaction. He felt that he owed them a legitimate grudge, and he looked forward eagerly to the prospect of identifying them. It would be a distinctly unpleasant shock for them to be confronted with the

man whom they imagined to be safely suffocated!

Dick had not entirely recovered from the effects of his adventure. His hands were still very painful, and his whole body ached from his fall from the gate. Now that he was compelled to sit still and do nothing, he felt distinctly shaky, and at the same time possessed by a feeling of irritating restlessness. Dr. Weatherleigh, who sat opposite him in the corner of the carriage, must have noticed his condition.

"You are not yourself, my boy, and I don't wonder at it," he said gently. "I have some knowledge of medicine, and I know the symptoms. I always carry with me a sedative of my own composition. A small dose of it will do you all the good in the world."

He produced a flask, poured some of its contents into the cup, and offered it to Dick, who swallowed it gratefully. Almost immediately his restlessness left him, and he fell into a doze, infinitely pleasant to his tired body. The rumble of the train soothed him; and he fell into pleasant dreams in which Alison played the principal part.

How long he dozed he could not tell. His dreams changed, and he was back in the cell, the cold draught of air from the roof blowing strongly upon him. He opened his eyes, to find the carriage door wide open, and a tall form standing up beside it.

He sprang to his feet, half-awake, feeling instinctively the imminence of catastrophe. As he did so, the man thrust out an arm, at the same time thrusting his foot between Dick's legs. For an instant Dick swayed, clutching wildly. Then he felt himself hurled off his balance and falling through space. And above the roar of the train he heard peal after peal of the demoniac laughter of the Funny Toff.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

THE fall was like some horrible nightmare, in which one feels oneself sliding down a precipice, through eternity. It ended in a violent shock, the nightmare came to an end, and Dick sank into oblivion.

He came to himself slowly, dazed, struggling to remember where he was and what had happened to him. Something roared above him, shaking the ground on which he lay. A hot breath of steam enveloped him, the roaring passed away into the distance. Then he remembered the train, and the awful, mocking laughter of the Funny Toff.

The whole of the past came back to him in a flood of memory. That tall form which he had wakened to find towering over him—that must have been Dr. Weatherleigh. Then, terrible and incredible thought, Dr. Weatherleigh, Alison's father, must be the Funny Toff! It could not be, it was like some ridiculous dream, wherein our familiar friends take strange and impossible forms. He must still be light-headed from his fall.

He realised that he was rigid with cold, and very slowly he moved one limb after another. The effort racked him with pain, but he felt that no bones were broken. Laboriously he dragged himself to his feet.

A tall embankment, along the summit of which ran the railway, stretched above his head, and at its foot ran a small river, swollen by the storm of the previous day. The intention of the Funny Toff was plain. His

victim was to have rolled down the embankment into the river, where, stunned by his fall, he would certainly have been drowned. Dick's life had been saved by the fact that he had rolled into a clump of willows by the water-side, which had arrested his course. Among the willows he had lain hidden, both from the railway and from the fields beyond the river.

Dick's watch had stopped, and he had no means of ascertaining how long he had remained unconscious. A low-lying mist obscured the sun, but from general appearances Dick guessed that it was about the middle of the afternoon. As to where he was, that was another matter. The local train, which he and Dr. Weatherleigh had boarded, ran no further than Frome, where they would have had to change into the London train. Since they had still been in the local train when he was hurled out of the carriage, he must be somewhere west of Frome.

About a quarter of a mile from where he stood, a bridge broke the level side of the embankment. Towards this Dick made his way, hobbling painfully. The bridge crossed a road, and here Dick stood for a few moments, wondering which way to turn. He had only one thought, to get back to London as soon as possible.

He turned to the right, more or less at random, and began to walk down the road. It was no more than a lane, bordered by meadows, which stretched out on either hand as far as he could see. But in the distance ahead of him was a cluster of roofs. It might be possible for him to get a conveyance of some kind there to take him to the nearest station.

Dick had not gone many yards before he heard the sound of a horn behind him, and drew aside to

allow the vehicle to pass. It was a tradesman's van, and the driver drew up beside him. "Like a lift?" he called out.

Dick accepted gratefully. The van must be going to some town or village, from which he could proceed. He climbed in beside the driver, and the van started on again. Dick felt that some explanation of his condition was called for. "I'm very grateful to you, I'm sure," he said. "I was walking down by the river to see if it was any good bringing a rod, and I tripped and sprained my ankle. I had rather a bad fall, and nearly slipped into the water. Where are you bound for, by the way?"

"I thought you'd come to grief, as I came up to you," replied the driver. "I'm going on into Frome, if that's any good to you."

"It'll suit me very nicely," said Dick. "I wish you'd put me down at the station, if it's not out of your way."

It appeared that the driver would have to pass within a few yards of the station, and there Dick was duly deposited. The station clock showed the time to be half-past four when he arrived, and he was in time to catch a train due at Paddington shortly before seven. He took a seat in a first-class carriage, and sank back wearily among the cushions.

What was he to do next? Struggle as he would against the realisation of the horrible fact, there was no doubt that Dr. Weatherleigh was the Funny Toff. Although he had been too dazed to recognise him at the moment of his attack, there could be no doubt that Dr. Weatherleigh had attempted to murder him. The administration of the sedative, which had sent him so conveniently to sleep, was almost proof in

itself. Then, who else could have entered the carriage? Dick had opened his eyes at each station at which the train stopped, and was certain that no other passenger had got in. The train had no corridor, and it was incredible that any third person had climbed along the footboard. This would entail his having previously attacked Dr. Weatherleigh, which could scarcely have happened without Dick being awakened. No, reason as he would, there was no possible alternative.

This being so, could he be the agent for bringing Alison's father to justice. The very idea was repugnant to him. Yet, on the other hand, to allow him to escape was equally impossible. For one thing, his own life would be in hourly danger, for Dr. Weatherleigh was not likely to allow him to live, with the knowledge he possessed. And, most weighty consideration of all, such a course would destroy for ever his hopes of marrying Alison.

Dick closed his eyes, and the dead forms of Inspector Brooks and of Pussy Herridge appeared to him. Their staring eyes seemed to glare at him accusingly, as at one who held their murderer in his power and hesitated to bring him to justice. He knew that there was only one thing that he could do. At whatever cost to his own and Alison's happiness, he must put his knowledge at the disposal of the police.

On the arrival of the train at Paddington, he took a taxi to Scotland Yard and was shown into the presence of Sir Edric.

"Hullo, Dick!" exclaimed the latter. "I have been wondering what had become of you. But, good lord, man, what have you been doing to yourself?"

"I've had a pretty strenuous time since I saw you last," replied Dick. "But, as a result, I've found out who the Funny Toff is. I only wish from the bottom of my heart that I hadn't. Listen, and I'll tell you the whole story."

Sir Edric listened, scribbling hasty notes on a pad of paper from time to time. When Dick had finished, his friend rose from his chair and put a hand on his shoulder. "Thank God you're safe, anyhow," he said. "I can understand what this means to you, Dick, and I can't tell you how grateful I am that you came to me straight away."

Sir Edric paused, and glanced at the clock. "It's now eight o'clock," he said. "The train by which you started from Wells got to Paddington just before one. That means that he's got seven hours' start of us."

"Then you think that he's escaped by this time?" inquired Dick eagerly.

Sir Edric shook his head. "I think not," he replied. "You must remember that he probably thinks that you are dead, or at least very seriously injured, in which case he would have time in which to make his preparations. Unless he hears of your body being found, he will certainly endeavour to make his escape, though. We must let him think that you are dead, at least for the present. Thank goodness, you came straight here, without anybody seeing you! He may have had a man on the look-out at Paddington, but we must risk that."

"What do you imagine that he will do, then?" asked Dick.

"I fancy that the first thing he did when he got to London was to warn the members of his gang.

Then he would make arrangements for his escape from the country, taking the leaden pig, and probably the gang with him. You may be sure that he will leave no person or thing behind him that could give him away. All that will take time, and we are probably not too late to get on his track. I will issue orders at once to have every place which he frequents watched; Wapping, the house at Coldharbour Point, the mine workings and Lestridge Hall. Incidentally, I'll get the Wells people to keep an eye on the hospital. We don't want anything to happen to Miss Weatherleigh."

"That's awfully good of you, Conway," replied Dick gratefully. "You know she's completely innocent, of course."

"Of course," said Sir Edric. "Now, as for you, I'm not going to let you out of my sight. You'll stay here, in this room. We can get you in something to eat, and you can sleep in that chair."

But Dick was in no mood for sleep. He sat in the chair, while members of the detective staff of the Yard came and went, each receiving clear-cut instructions from his Chief. After their departure, an interval followed, during which Sir Edric and Dick partook of a hurried meal. And then reports began to flow in with bewildering rapidity.

A man answering to the description of Dr. Weatherleigh had arrived at Paddington at one o'clock, and had deposited a heavy suit-case in the cloak-room. Two or three hours later, another man, who looked like a gentleman's servant, had called with the ticket and taken the case away in a car.

The Poole police telephoned to say that they had

visited the *Rosalie*. They had ascertained from the Customs authorities that her papers were in perfect order, and that she had arrived from London with a cargo of malt, the greater part of which had been discharged. Her skipper—who was also registered as her owner—and his crew of two, had left the vessel at about three o'clock, saying that they would return in half an hour. They had not since been seen.

"Just as I thought," commented Sir Edric. "The members of the gang have been warned, and the leaden pig has been removed to a place of safety. Our friend is on the run, that's certain. I've circulated his description to every policeman in England, and he can't possibly escape us."

"He'll be arrested at sight, I suppose," remarked Dick uneasily.

But Sir Edric shook his head. "No, the orders are to leave him alone, but to report his movements here. I've spread a net to catch the whole crowd. They are bound to meet, if only to share out the proceeds, and I fancy they'll meet in this country. Hullo, here's another message!"

It was to the effect that the call to Alison in Bath had been made from a call-box in the City. Professor Cobbold actually existed, and was an authority upon antiquities. He had, however, been in Berlin for the past three weeks.

But perhaps the most sensational report came from the Lincolnshire police. Acting on the Yard's instructions, they had proceeded to Lestrige Hall, and had reached there about nine o'clock. They were met by the butler, who had already telephoned for them. Half an hour or so earlier, while the servants were

having their supper, the house had been entered, and some of Dr. Weatherleigh's most treasured possessions removed.

"More leaden pigs, or something of that kind, I bet!" exclaimed Sir Edric. "Lestridge Hall was where the proceeds of the various robberies were kept until they could be disposed of, for a certainty. We may recover your sister's diamonds yet, Dick. But you see what this means. The gang haven't dispersed yet; they are still busy collecting the loot. Dr. Weatherleigh is working swiftly, but without panic. He's collecting everything and everybody at some pre-arranged rendezvous. We'll have him, without a doubt."

The rest of the night passed without any further incidents of importance being reported. Dick dozed off in his chair, the prey to horrible dreams. Day dawned without any further news of Dr. Weatherleigh. And, as the morning passed without any reports of his having been seen, Sir Edric began to pace the floor, a victim of unconcealed anxiety.

"He can't have slipped through the net!" he exclaimed. "It must be that he is lying hidden somewhere until he hears what has happened to you. We shall have to publish the news of your safety. That will bolt him, for a certainty."

The hours dragged on, with maddening slowness to both Dick and Sir Edric. At last, about three o'clock in the afternoon, Sir Edric picked up the telephone receiver, in reply to one of the almost incessant calls. He listened, and then turned to Dick, the light of excitement in his eyes.

"Dr. Weatherleigh, alone and driving a grey four-seater car, passed through Seven Kings five minutes ago, going East," he said.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

"THIS, I think, is a job for the Flying Squad," continued Eir Edric. "There's a car been standing by waiting, ever since yesterday evening. Now that we've picked up his trail, we shan't lose it again. Dick, I want you to go with them. I know it's a lot to ask, but you may be required for identification purposes, if he leads us to the gang."

Dick consented, readily enough. The excitement of the chase was in his blood, and he felt that in some vague way his presense at her father's arrest might soften the blow for Alison. He was escorted downstairs, where he ran into the arms of Pollard.

"Come on, Mr. Penhampton!" exclaimed the latter as he caught sight of Dick. "Here's the car, we haven't a moment to spare."

He and Dick jumped into the back, while a fourth man took his seat by the side of the driver. The car gathered way almost before they were settled, and in a few seconds was speeding eastwards along the Embankment.

"The Chief has told me all about your adventures, sir," said Pollard. "If you'll allow me to say so, you've been wonderfully lucky. In fact, your imagination got you into scrapes which your luck got you out of. You can't guess where our man is bound for, can you? You don't think he's doubling back to Lestridge Hall?"

"I shouldn't think so," replied Dick. "He would guess that the place was being watched, after the faked

burglary. Seven Kings is a few miles out on the main East Anglian road. I should say he was bound for one of the East coast ports, Harwich, Lowestoft, or Yarmouth perhaps. There are several services from Harwich to the Continent."

"Every port is being watched," remarked Pollard. "There's very little chance of his getting away, if that's his game. The Chief thinks that he will meet the rest of his gang somewhere. We'll be able to keep track of him all right. By this time, every police station in the direction he's going will have been warned, and they'll 'phone the Yard as he passes. They've orders not to interfere with him; we don't want him to think he's being followed. And there's a wireless set on this car. We've only got to ask the Yard from time to time for the latest news of him."

By this time the car had reached Blackfriars Bridge, where the policeman on point duty held up the traffic for it to dash up Queen Victoria Street. They were compelled to slow up for a few minutes as they traversed the City, but they were soon past the labyrinth of hay wagons and tram lines at Aldgate, and they gathered speed again as they entered the Mile End Road. They reached Seven Kings, thirteen miles from the starting-point, at exactly half-past three.

"Not bad going," commented Pollard. "The chap's only half an hour ahead of us. Hullo, what does this man want?"

A constable had run out into the road and leaped on to the footboard. "The man you want is driving a four-seater Vauxhall, painted grey, sir," he reported. "He was held up here in a traffic block, and I had a good look at him and the car. The number of the car is FZ 2004."

"Good man!" exclaimed Pollard, as the constable dropped off. "Call up the Yard, Curtis, and ask if they've any news."

The man sitting beside the driver tapped out a short message on his apparatus, then, putting a receiver on his head, listened. "Brentwood, 3.25, sir," he reported.

"That's ten miles ahead," remarked Pollard. "He's not hurrying, he wouldn't dare risk being caught in a trap. We've got to reduce the distance a bit, though. Speed her up, driver."

The driver nodded and put his foot on the accelerator. They bounded forward until the speedometer needle rose to between forty and fifty, where it remained, except for a slow through Romford, until they reached Brentwood at a quarter to four, where they learned that their quarry had gone straight on towards Chelmsford.

"Only twenty minutes ahead now," said Pollard. "He won't have reached Chelmsford yet. On we go!"

As they were passing through Ingatestone, Curtis cabled up again, and reported: "Chelmsford, 3.45, sir."

"Ah, he's increased his speed at last," remarked Pollard. "That's ten minutes ago, and he was then six miles ahead. Push on into Chelmsford as fast as ever you can. He may have left the main road there, and turned off north."

It was three minutes past four as they reached the centre of the town, where a sergeant informed them that car number FZ 2004 had kept straight on towards Colchester.

"That's another twenty-two miles," said Pollard, as they flew out of the town. "Damn him! If he drives

that Vauxhall all out he'll leave us behind yet. We've got to catch sight of him before he gets to Colchester, or we'll waste a lot of time finding out which way he's gone. The road forks there right to Harwich, left to Lowestoft and Yarmouth. I'm assuming that he's making for the coast, Mr. Penhampton. It's the most likely thing for him to do. Shake every ounce out of her, driver."

"I suppose it is, though he hasn't got that barge handy now," replied Dick. "He's hardly likely to be going all this way round to Lincolnshire."

Conversation became impossible. The car swayed and jolted as the driver swung in and out of the stream of traffic. He cut in remorselessly, taking risks that made Dick's heart leap into his mouth, and evoking volleys of abuse from the scandalised users of the road. They covered the nine miles to Witham in eleven minutes, and there pulled up, as a frantically waving constable dashed up to them.

"Passed through here three minutes ago, sir," he painted breathlessly. "Straight on, towards Colchester."

"Got him now, I think," remarked Pollard complacently. "Ease her down to about forty, driver. We don't want to come on him too suddenly. We mustn't let him know we're after him. He would lead us away from the rendezvous if we did."

They sighted him first on a straight stretch of road beyond Marks Tey. Curtis was the first to distinguish a car, travelling slightly slower than they were. "That's him, sir!" he called out. "I can't read the number, but it's a grey Vauxhall, all right."

"Don't get any closer then, till we make sure," replied Pollard. "He's about half a mile ahead now."

Keep that distance from him till he gets into the outskirts of Colchester. Then close up to about three or four hundred yards."

The driver obeyed, and they were a short distance behind as they entered the town. Here they lost sight of him round the corners, but a constable put them on the right track. "That's the car, sure enough, sir," he reported, in answer to Pollard's question. "FZ 2004. He's just gone by. Took the main Ipswich road."

"That looks as if he's making for Lowestoft or Yarmouth, unless he means to turn off at Stratford St. Mary for Harwich, which isn't likely," said Pollard. "Confound it, it's getting devilish dark. You'll have to close up a bit, driver, as soon as you sight him again. Run up to him, and then drop behind again, or he'll guess he's being followed."

They caught up with him just outside Colchester, and kept in touch with him along the seventeen miles to Ipswich. Fortunately there was plenty of traffic on the road, and consequently their quarry's suspicions were not aroused. Having reached Ipswich, they crept close enough up in Tavern Street to read the number of the car, then dropped back again, for fear that he should recognise them in his driving mirror. A little farther on, to their astonishment, he turned to the right along the Felixstowe road.

"Where the dickens is he going to now?" exclaimed Pollard. "There's a river on either side of him, with no bridges over them, if he keeps on. It's a regular cul-de-sac. Don't lose sight of him, driver."

But before the car reached Derby Road Station, it turned sharply to the left once more, and proceeded down a road which rapidly degenerated into a coun-

try lane. And as it did so, the man in it switched on his headlights.

"Now I'm lost!" exclaimed Pollard. "There's nothing down here but a village or two, and then the River Deben, which is about a mile wide. Unless he swims it he's cornered. You'll have to do the best you can without lights, driver. If you switch them on, he'll know we're after him."

They followed the lane for mile after mile, guided mainly by the headlights of the car in front of them. It was a perilous journey, for by now it was almost completely dark, and only the skill and eyesight of the driver saved them, time after time, from plunging into the ditch at the side of the road. At last, after a particularly narrow escape, when they had only been saved from collision with a bank by a desperate wrench at the wheel, Pollard decided upon bolder tactics.

"It's no good," he said. "We'll have to switch on the lights and chance it. We're not more than a mile or two from the river, and this lane runs straight down to it without a turning, from what I can see of it on the map."

The driver obeyed him, and in an instant the back of the car in front was illumined by the powerful glare. The driver must have realised that he was being pursued, for he immediately put on speed and began to draw away from them.

"Damn it, we've got to stop him now!" yelled Pollard. "Pass him and then slow down. You know the trick!"

The driver put his foot on the accelerator, and the car bounded forward. At first the distance between the two cars remained the same, then it slowly decreased as the pursuers gained ground.

"We'll have to chance his shooting over his shoulder," remarked Pollard. "He's not likely to make very good practice at this speed, that's one comfort. Jove, we're gaining on him!"

They were—of that there could be no doubt. Inch by inch they crept up, until only a few yards separated the two cars. The lane was narrow, so narrow that it seemed impossible to pass. But the driver, calling to his aid the last ounce of power which he had hitherto reserved, crept up until he was almost touching the mudguards of the car in front. And then he swerved to pass.

Pollard yelled out something, probably a summons to surrender, but his voice was drowned in a rending crash as the two cars lurched into one another. Dick was hurled on to the floor as the off-side wheels slid into the ditch and then bumped out again. By the time that he had recovered himself, they were past, and the other car was behind them.

"Narrow squeak, that!" exclaimed Pollard. "Stand by, all of you, and jump out when we stop!"

The driver continued for a couple of hundred yards, then applied his brakes suddenly, and swung the car across the lane. They all leapt out as he did so, and began to run back to the car behind, which had pulled up when its driver saw their manœuvre.

Dr. Weatherleigh—for it was he, there was no doubt about it now, Dick had caught sight of his face the instant after they had flashed past him—saw them coming. He put down his accelerator, and the big Vauxhall bounded forward towards them. His intention to run them down was obvious, and they scattered like frightened birds into the hedges on either side. But Dr. Weatherleigh never paused.

Faster and faster the Vauxhall hurtled on, towards the police car which stood athwart the road, barring its passage.

Dick watched it, fascinated. He found himself shouting at the top of his voice, calling upon the madman to stop.

A wild peal of maniacal laughter replied to him, that awful laughter which he had heard twice in his life before. Then came the crash, the horrible rending of torn metal, and Dr. Weatherleigh flew, as if hurled from a catapult, out of the driving seat, over the wreck of the police car, and on to the ground beyond.

Then came silence, utter and profound.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

THE lights of the cars had been extinguished in the crash. Pollard produced a torch, and, closely followed by the other three, ran forward to where Dr. Weatherleigh's body lay stretched upon the ground. At the first attempt to move it, the head rolled limply to one side. Pollard lowered the body to the ground and rose to his feet.

"Broken his neck," he remarked tersely. "As clear a case of suicide as ever I saw. Good Lord, I never heard a man laugh like that! I still feel creepy from the sound of it. The man must have been a maniac!"

He paused, regarding the prone figure at his feet. "Well, that's the end of the Funny Toff," he continued. "Now, what about the rest of the gang, I wonder? I reckon that he was on his way to meet them down by the riverside. The point is, how are we going to round them up? Better call up the Yard, Curtis."

But Curtis, who had been examining the wreckage, shook his head. "No good, sir," he replied. "The instrument's smashed to smithereens. It's past repair, from what I can see of it."

"Then we'll have to tackle them ourselves," decided Pollard. "There are four of us—I want you in on this, Mr. Penhampton—and heaven knows how many there are of them. The first thing to do is to reconnoitre. I'm going forward to see if I can locate them. The rest of you stay here."

"I'd like to come with you, Inspector," ventured Dick. "I've done a bit of deer-stalking in my time. You needn't be afraid that I shall make a noise."

Pollard hesitated. "All right," he said at last. "You'll be useful if it comes to a scrap. Come along, quietly, mind."

The two set off, following the lane. Dick, as he moved warily forward, was full of thankfulness at Dr. Weatherleigh's end. Perhaps, after all, Alison might be spared the full horror of her father's crimes. Had this been at the back of Dr. Weatherleigh's mind as he rushed forward to his death? Perhaps, when he caught sight of Dick's face in the glare of his headlights, he had seen the way to ensure the happiness of his daughter whom he genuinely loved.

It was further to the river than they had expected, and they must have covered more than a mile before the trees surrounding the lane grew thinner, and they could make out a wide expanse of mud and water. Pollard halted, and whispered in Dick's ear. "This lane seems to end in a hard of some kind, and isn't that a boat of some kind lying off it? Bear to the right a bit, we shall see better."

They crept on for a few yards, and then came to a sudden stop. The night was not entirely dark, a moon had risen somewhere behind the clouds, and from where they were they had a good view of the river. As Pollard had said, the lane ended in a rough causeway, running across the mud to the water's edge. Anchored in the middle of the fairway was the long low shape of a big motor-boat, and at the end of the hard was a dinghy, with two men standing by it. Even in the uncertain light, Dick recognised one of these men as Ben, the skipper of the *Rosalie*.

Without a word Pollard and Dick retraced their steps. It was not until they were well away from the water-side that either of them spoke. "I'm very glad to see that motor-boat," remarked Dick cheerfully.

"Why?" growled Pollard. "It doesn't seem to me to make matters any simpler."

"Because I deduced her existence long ago at the time of Pussy Herridge's murder," said Dick. "Well, Inspector, this is how I see it. The gang is on board that boat, ready to make a bolt for it. Two men with the dinghy are waiting for the arrival of the Chief. As soon as he turned up, they would take him aboard and slip away. Don't you think so?"

Pollard nodded. "That's about the size of it," he replied. "The point is, what do we do next? Thanks to that smash, we're out of touch with the world. If we try and rush the two fellows with the dinghy, the rest of the gang will get under way and clear out. And I don't see how we're to stop them."

"More likely they'd come ashore and scupper us," remarked Dick. "We don't know how many of them there are on board, remember. No, that won't do. By Jove, though, I believe I've got an idea!"

They had reached the cars by now, and Pollard turned impatiently to the driver, who had busied himself examining the wreckage.

"Any chance of making either of these cars go?" he asked.

"I'm afraid not, sir," replied the driver. "They're both properly done in. There isn't enough left to make a Ford between the two of them."

"Hell!" exclaimed Pollard. "We can't let those

chaps down there get away with it. What's your idea, Mr. Penhampton?"

"It looks as though they didn't hear the crash," replied Dick. "If that's the case, they'll wait a bit longer for their Chief, and they're pretty safe where they are for the next few hours. Besides, it's dead low water, as you may have noticed, and by the look of her, that motor-boat won't be able to get over the bar at the entrance of the river till at least half-tide, say three hours hence. I take it that you'd like to capture them yourself, Inspector?"

"I would that!" exclaimed Pollard savagely. "I don't want a lot of country policemen butting in."

"All right, then," continued Dick. "We've got a four-mile walk before us, to a little village called Bawdsey, at the mouth of the river. I know it well. I've sailed up and down all these rivers, and there's a fisherman there that I've hired boats from. Besides, there's a telephone, and you can call up Ipswich for reinforcements. By the look of it we shall want them. Come on, I'll explain the dodge as we go along."

Pollard consented, not from any great faith in Dick's scheme, but because his urgent need was to get into touch with the world. But, as they proceeded, and Dick unfolded his plan, he smiled grimly. "It's worth trying," he agreed. "Anyhow, I confess I can't think of anything better. Before we could get a decent force at the mouth of the river, they'd be away. It's a sporting chance of capturing them, anyhow."

It took them rather over an hour to reach Bawdsey, where they separated, Pollard to telephone, and Dick to interview his friend the fisherman. He found him in the local inn, and persuaded him to let him have his boat for the night. He spun a yarn about having

some friends who wanted to try their hands at night fishing, and explained that he would not want the man himself. "You can trust me with her all right, can't you?" he said.

"Aye, sir, I'll trust you," said the man, after a deep pull at the beer with which Dick had provided him. "You're handy enough with a boat, I know that. Besides, the tide's making, and if you do get on the mud, you'll soon float off again. I'll put you and your friends on board, as soon as you're ready, sir."

The sight of three men in uniform waiting outside was something of a shock to the fisherman, but a few reassuring words from Pollard soon put him at his ease. They rowed off to the boat, and very soon Dick had cast off the moorings and hoisted sail. A faint air was blowing up the river, and with the aid of this and the favourable tide they began to drift upstream.

"I got on to the Superintendent," reported Pollard. "He'll have half a dozen chaps hidden on shore in less than half an hour. They won't move until they hear my whistle. It all depends on those two fellows with the dinghy not spotting them. If they take it into their heads to walk up the lane and find the cars, they may give the alarm before we're ready."

"They aren't likely to do that," replied Dick. "If they've orders to stop where they are, they won't disobey them. Now, we're a party of amateur fishermen, remember, and we've had a drink or two at the pub before we started. It's no good trying to come upon them unawares, they're bound to see us coming. Come on, give us a song, somebody."

The driver, it appeared, had an extensive repertoire, and very soon the silence of the river was disturbed by his stentorian strains, in which the rest

joined raucously. At last Dick, who was at the helm, uttered an exclamation and pointed straight ahead. "There she is, about half a mile ahead!" he said. "Sing like hell, boys!"

They obeyed him, and the lugger drifted on. There was barely enough breeze to give her steerage way, but Dick edged her gently towards the dim form of the motor-boat. The minutes crept by, the eyes of the four men fixed upon the hull ahead of them. At last they could make out the form of a man standing forward on the look-out.

"Here you are," whispered Dick. "Don't stop singing, whatever you do, but catch hold of these belaying pins. You'll find them better than truncheons in a scrap. Now then, stand by!"

They were not more than a hundred yards away now, drifting steadily down upon the bows of the motor-boat. Dick sheered off a bit, as though to pass her, anxious not to alarm the look-out until the last moment. He glanced at his watch. It was just an hour since they had left Bawdsey.

The lugger drifted on, till only fifty yards separated the boats. Twenty, ten! They would clear easily. There was no light in the cabin of the motor-boat, no sign of life on board her except for the look-out forward. Then suddenly Dick put his helm down, and the lugger sheered in, aiming to strike the motor-boat amidships.

"Ahoy, there, where the hell are you coming to?" roared the look-out. "On deck, you chaps!"

He picked up a boat-hook, and made a frantic effort to fend the lugger off. Before he could do anything, she had bumped into the side of the motor-boat. The singing ceased abruptly, and a long shrill blast from

Pollard's whistle echoed from bank to bank of the river. At the same moment the cabin burst into a blaze of light, by which could be seen the forms of men struggling through the companionway.

The four men in the lugger leapt on the deck of the motor-boat to meet them. Dick heard Pollard's voice calling upon them to surrender, and then found himself engaged in a life and death struggle with the look-out. He struck wildly at him with his belaying-pin, and the man dropped his weapon with a howl of agony. His arm appeared to be broken, and Dick, seeing him fall, ran aft to help the others.

He found them desperately engaged in the cockpit. Curtis was bleeding from a wound in the head, but all three were on their feet, opposing a group of men who were trying to drive them overboard. There had been at least half a dozen men in the cabin, but they were hampered by the fact that only one at a time could come out through the hatch. Dick took his place beside Pollard, and as he did so narrowly avoided a blow directed at his head with a piece of lead pipe. He closed with his assailant, and felt a keen thrill of delight as he recognised the distorted face of the man he knew as Ted.

For an eternity, as it seemed, they swayed backwards and forwards. But Dick was a more powerful man than his adversary, and after a while he wrenched himself clear and Ted staggered back. There was no room to use the belaying-pin, and Dick shot out with his left and caught the man under the jaw. He fell limply into the cockpit, and Dick drew back to get a moment's breathing space. And as he did so, he heard the sound of oars, rowing furiously.

This would settle it, he thought. This should be the

police from shore, come out in the dinghy to reinforce them. But if they had miscalculated their time! If this should be Ben and his companion, preparing to take the attackers in the rear! He struck at a man who had sprung up in Ted's place, but the man dodged, and he felt a numbing blow on his shoulder. He swayed, trying desperately to save himself from falling. As he did so he heard the grating of the dinghy against the ship's side, and a burly form in blue thrust him aside and drove at his assailant with his truncheon.

A shout from Pollard told him that his scheme had succeeded.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

THE arrival of reinforcements decided the struggle in favour of the police. The defenders of the motor-boat were overcome one by one, and securely handcuffed. There were seven of them in all and most of them bore signs of the recent encounter. Among them Dick recognised Ted and Arthur. Ben and his companion had been overpowered on shore, he learnt, and were under a guard which had been left behind for that purpose.

"Well, Inspector," remarked the Superintendent, mopping his head. "You've certainly provided a very decent little scrap. That's ten of them, including the body you asked me to pick up. This is your show. What would you like me to do next?"

"Take these chaps ashore, if you don't mind, sir, and get them safely into the cells," replied Pollard. "You might take my two men with you, they look as if they could do with a bit of patching up. What about you, Mr. Penhampton?"

"Oh, I'm all right," replied Dick, feeling himself gingerly all over. "I've been through so much in the last two or three days that an extra clout or two won't hurt me. It's a rest cure I want. But I'll stay and give you a hand, Inspector."

"I should be glad if you would," said Pollard. "I'm beginning to believe there's something in your imagination after all." Then, turning to the Superintendent: "I should be glad if you could send a car

back for us in an hour or two's time, sir. I've got to examine this boat for stolen property."

The Superintendent nodded, and set to work to supervise the landing of the prisoners. As soon as the last batch had left in the dinghy, Dick sat down in the cabin and lighted a cigarette. "The stuff's on board somewhere, Inspector, you may bet your boots," he said. "I learnt from that fisherman friend of mine that this craft came in on last night's tide. She must have been lying up London River somewhere, and Ben must have got orders to leave the *Rosalie* at Poole, and bring the motor-boat round here. She was the rendezvous, of course. The man who took the leaden pig from the cloak-room at Paddington joined her here, and so did the fellows who fetched the rest of the stuff from Lestrige Hall. We'd better go over her systematically."

They ransacked the vessel thoroughly, forcing open lockers and searching every corner, without discovering anything of value. Pollard scratched his head reflectively. "They can't have dumped the stuff overboard!" he exclaimed.

"I shouldn't think so," replied Dick. "Though we'll have the river dredged if we can't find it. Good Lord! I know. What an ass I was not to have thought of it before! Here, lend me a hand, there's a good fellow."

He tore up the carpet with which the floor of the cabin was covered, exposing the floor boards. These were screwed down to their bearers, but the screws were bright, and had evidently been recently inserted. "Let's have a screw-driver!" exclaimed Dick excitedly. "There's one in the engine room; I saw it just now."

Pollard fetched it, and Dick took the screws out one by one, until he was enabled to lift the boards. The space between them and the bottom of the ship was tightly packed with ballast, formed of leaden pigs. And among them were three which bore curious antique inscriptions.

"There you are!" exclaimed Dick. "There's the stuff, or at all events some of it. Pretty neat, eh? Nobody would guess if they didn't know the secret. One of these pigs is the one that Dr. Weatherleigh brought from Wells with him. The other two are what the men fetched from Lestrige Hall, no doubt."

"But I don't see the stuff," objected Pollard doubtfully.

"We'll get these pigs ashore, and I'll soon show you," replied Dick. "The sooner we get them to the Yard the better, I suppose."

Pollard agreed, though without fully comprehending. "I'll get the Superintendent to put a guard over the boat," he said. "Perhaps he'll send us back to the Yard in a car, and we can take these pigs with us."

Between them they managed to get the pigs on deck, and when the dinghy came off to fetch them, the Superintendent himself, all agog to see the end of the matter, was in it. Pollard explained his necessity for returning immediately to London, and the Superintendent agreed to put a car at his disposal.

Dick, completely exhausted, slept most of the journey, and it was not until the car drew up at the Yard, in the early hours of the morning, that he awoke. Sir Edric, warned by telephone from Ipswich of their arrival, was waiting for them, and they proceeded to his room to recount their adventures.

"By Jove, carried her by boarding, did you?" he exclaimed, as they finished their story. "That was a pretty good effort:

" 'They fought as they fought in Nelson's fleet—
They were stripped to the waist, they were bare
to the feet.
As it was in the days of old.'"

"Not quite accurate, perhaps, but picturesque enough. I'll bet that was your idea, Dick! Now then, let's have a look at these pigs of yours. I had a forge and an iron pan rigged up as soon as I got your message."

They went downstairs, where they found the forge, and the pigs guarded by a couple of men. The pan was already on the fire, and, under Sir Edric's instructions, one of the pigs was lifted into it.

Dick uttered an exclamation of astonishment. The metal of the pig began to run as soon as it touched the hot sides of the pan. "That's not lead!" he said. "It's something melting at a much lower temperature, ordinary fusible metal, probably. You see the idea? There would be danger of the stones cracking in contact with molten lead, so they used something which melted at a low temperature—look!"

The metal melted rapidly, filling the pan with a silvery liquid. And on its surface appeared a mass of roughly-cut stones, floating so thickly that they covered the whole extent of the pan.

"The Hatton Garden stones!" exclaimed Sir Edric. "We'll have to skim them off with a ladle. All right, put that pan aside. There are a couple more, we'll see what's in the other two."

The experiment was repeated, and this time the blood-red glitter of the Maharajah's rubies greeted them. At the third and last melting, the glorious stones from the famous Hardway necklace scintillated before their eyes.

"Well, that's that," commented Sir Edric. "We owe this to you, Dick. But I cannot help seeing the humour of the fact that you lived at Lestridge Hall all that time, with your sister's diamonds lying on a shelf in your host's study!"

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That same day Dick travelled down to Wells. Alison was much better, but it was some days before it was judged wise to break the news of her father's death to her. Dick was entrusted with the task, and explained that he had been present when Dr. Weatherleigh was killed in a motor-car accident. Alison, in her weak state, was almost prostrated by the shock. Dick, caring only that she should be spared the revelations which must follow, took the doctor in charge of the case into his confidence, and begged him to prescribe a long sea voyage.

Consequently, as soon as she was convalescent, she left England in company with her Aunt Edith, on a six months' trip. She was thus spared the details of the coming trial, one of the most sensational of recent years. The man known as Arthur volunteered to give information, and, when it had been established that he had taken no active part in the murders of Inspectors Brooks and Pussy Herridge, he was allowed to turn King's evidence.

His story covered a series of robberies extending over many years, of which the majority of the pro-

ceeds were never recovered. The gang had been very strictly disciplined, operating under exact and minute orders. One or two of its earlier members had, after certain acts of disobedience, simply disappeared. Arthur either could not or would not say how. This had not been without its effect on the remainder, who found, in addition, that the distribution of profits kept them in considerable affluence.

Inspector Brooks, following two members of the gang from the Margate Jetty, had been in his turn shadowed by their confederates. He had been allowed to overhear a conversation arranged for his benefit, in which he had been given a hint that the Hardway diamonds were hidden in the disused lead-workings in the Mendips, but were to be removed immediately. He had set off at once, but Ted, Ben, and two other members of the gang had driven down in a fast car, and were ready for him on his arrival. He was ambushed, overpowered, and flung into the lethal cell from which Dick had so narrowly escaped.

Pussy Herridge might have been allowed to live, had he not been unwise enough to express in public his belief that it had been the Funny Toff's gang which had relieved him of his lawful swag. He knew that the police were shadowing him, and he had gratefully accepted the offer of a bargee to hide him on his barge until things had blown over. An appointment was made for him to embark at the steps by the Margate Jetty. Ben was waiting for him, he was taken on board the motor-boat, and conveyed to Coldharbour Point. The *Rosalie* was already lying there. As he ascended her side he was pushed into the river and allowed to drown.

The identity of the Funny Toff had remained a

mystery throughout. Even Ted and Ben, the principal members of the gang, had never met him face to face. Dr. Weatherleigh must have studied the underworld very closely, for these two had received letters making appointments at an empty house in the country, where the conditions of their employment were explained to them by a man in a dark room. Within a week they were compromised to such an extent that they would not have dared to lay information even if they had desired to do so. It was through their agency that the remaining members had been recruited.

These two were sentenced to death, while the remainder of the gang were awarded varying terms of penal servitude. The day after the trial ended, Arthur was found murdered in Wapping, with a knife thrust through his heart. It was believed to be the work of the lorry driver, who had not been captured with the rest, and was never traced.

Dick and Alison were married shortly after the return of the latter to England. She knows the truth now, it would have been impossible to keep it from her indefinitely. But the past seems to have had no power permanently to impair her new-found happiness. Lestridge Hall was sold, but Mr. and Mrs. Penhampton live quietly in a beautiful old house in another part of the country, where their old friends are always welcome.

And Jerry Gould, who is constantly in attendance upon them, and therefore ought to know, says that they are so happy together that he thinks of getting married himself.

THE END

